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The struggling coot, unable to dive or to fly, was gripped and crushed in an instant. (Page 17)

GRAY EAGLE

BY
HERBERT RAVENEL MASS



MINTON, BALCH & COMPANY
NEW YORK

1927

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1927

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

Handwritten notes:
1911
G. W. M. ...
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Vertical handwritten note:
1911-1912

Gray Eagle

GRAY EAGLE

GRAY EAGLE

THE tyrant was coming. He was coming like a tyrant—announced by the tribute of thousands. A mile 'away that tribute might have been heard; a throbbing, reverberant, surging roar that filled the air and quelled all lesser noises.

In the heart of a myrtle thicket in the swamp woods, a big whitetail buck, lying half-asleep on a bed of dry dead leaves, heard the tumult and flicked an ear carelessly. He knew what it was, and he dozed on dreamily, listening, yet scarcely conscious of the distant turmoil.

A female gray fox, trailing a rabbit along a narrow bush-grown peninsula extending far into a wilderness of marsh, halted and crouched close to the ground as that air-shaking hubbub rolled swiftly down upon her. She was directly in its path, and, lover of silence that she was, for an instant the clamor startled and disconcerted her. But her fright was only momentary. Her sensitive ears, accus-

tomed to the faint, furtive sounds of the woods, throbbled with the mighty din of the tyrant's vassals; but already her cool, keen, calculating brain was occupied once more with the pressing business of the moment, the stalking of the little brown marsh hare whose scent was strong in her nostrils.

These, however—the whitetail buck and the fox—were exceptions. To them the coming of the tyrant meant nothing, because he was not their ruler and over them he exercised no sovereignty. But they were two among many. Under the white blanket of mist hanging over the watery flats that winter morning huddled a vast multitude of living things—ducks and coots in regiments and legions, mallard and pintail and blue-winged teal and widgeon; and all these were vassals of the tyrant, subject to his will and his power. To all these his coming brought not merely fear but overwhelming panic; and that hollow, drumming thunder, which rolled along the flats and filled the air and seemed to shake the mist blanket spread above the marshes, was the roar of their myriad pinions as, regiment after regiment, they rocketed upward and fled on swiftly whirring wings before the great gray eagle who was their scourge and sovereign.

He came on rather slowly, sailing on set, rigid pinions just under the opaque stratum of vapor which veiled the marshes from the morning sunlight.

Ahead of him the shallow waters of the marsh lagoons were packed and jammed with life. Under him they were empty, for no duck in all those thousands was bold enough to await the tyrant's arrival. Once they were fairly launched in flight they were comparatively safe, for they had learned that this gray eagle, like most others of his kind, seldom undertook a straight-away chase. They had learned also, however, that to delay their start one instant too long might be fatal. Hence that thunder of wings, which was the tribute of the tyrant's subjects to their lord, rolled down the flats well in advance of the eagle as he swept on just under the smooth white sheet of mist; and long before they saw him the hundreds of mallards, pintails and coots, dabbling and feeding in a certain long, marsh-encircled lagoon bordering the river, had warning of his approach.

To all those hundreds that warning brought terror which in nearly all of them was instantly manifest. The squadrons of big, green-headed mallards ceased their busy dabbling for food and, with low, excited quacks and apprehensive upward glances, bunched closer together in preparation for flight. The high-riding, swanlike pintails settled lower in the water and bent their long necks over their backs, searching the air for the enemy. A black fleet of coots, which a moment before had rested

almost motionless upon the surface, split suddenly down the middle, half the fleet making for one side of the lagoon and half making for the other. In all the feathered multitude floating on the placid, shallow waters spreading outward from the river only a gaudy shoveller drake, more brilliantly colored than the mallards and more beautiful even than the pintails except for his broad, ungainly looking bill, remained, to all appearances, indifferent to the peril.

The shoveller, an adult male already attired in full nuptial plumage of green and shining white and rich russet, floated near the middle of the lagoon in open water, free from weeds and sedge. A moment before he had been surrounded by the legions of the coots; but now the coot regiments had melted away around him, hastening toward the reedy margins with an awkward bobbing of blue-black heads and a flashing of gleaming white bills. The mallards were massed toward the northern end of the lagoon, the pintails toward the southern end and along the eastern edge. For a space of yards around the shoveller the water was empty. An enemy looking down from the air could not fail to see the lone drake floating quietly and seemingly unconcerned almost in the middle of the lagoon.

It was not indifference that held him there. Instinct wrestled with terror in the shoveller's brain

Instinct bade him be still. Terror urged him to flee. It was because instinct prevailed at first that the shoveller for some moments made no move.

A week before, a charge of duck shot had broken his right wing. The shattered bone had not yet knit. He could not fly, and more than once, since the power of flight had thus been taken from him, instinct had saved his life by freezing him into utter immobility in the presence of danger. This same instinct gripped him now, held him motionless as an anchored billet of wood on the glassy surface of the lagoon. But little by little, as the seconds passed, and the surging thunder of wings rolled nearer along the flats, and the panic of the ducks and coots in the pool around him flared higher and higher, the grip of instinct weakened and terror gained the upper hand.

Suddenly terror triumphed. From a marsh pond a quarter of a mile away another great flock of mallards had vaulted into the air. As the throbbing roar of their pinions smote the shoveller's ears, he leaped forward in the water and began swimming desperately toward the margin of the lagoon.

Fifty yards behind him, a squadron of pintail took wing with a sibilant noise as of wind rushing through bare tree-tops. In front of him a regiment of a hundred coots rose and scurried across the water with a mighty clatter of lobed feet pattering on the

surface. Next moment, to the right, to the left and ahead, the whole lagoon heaved thunderously upward, as the main body of the pintails and the vast array of the mallards rose in a solid, opaque mass.

For a space of seconds the air glittered and swirled with the flash of their whirring wings, while the water falling from their bodies shimmered in the pale morning light like rain. Then, above and behind him, dark against the mist blanket hanging over the marsh, the crippled shoveller saw the wide-pinioned shape of doom for which, even as he swam, his round, brilliant, golden eyes had been searching.

If the keener eyes of the gray eagle had already picked out the lone duck swimming across the surface of the lagoon ahead of him, and perhaps a hundred feet below him, for some moments he seemed to give no heed to it. Possibly he mistook the shoveller for a coot, many hundreds of which dotted the pools and ponds within range of his vision. Possibly his attention was distracted momentarily by the great twin armies of pintails and mallards which had surged upward from the long lagoon bordering the river and were racing off through the air, the mallards swinging to the right and the pintails to the left. At any rate, some seconds elapsed before the eagle, with a slight motion of his tail, altered his line of flight so that he would

pass directly over the center of the lagoon; and not until he was nearly over its center did he show unmistakably that he had found a victim suited to his fancy.

Until that moment he had sailed onward rather indolently, with no appearance of haste, his long, marbled wings fully extended and apparently as rigid as the lifeless wings of a monoplane. Then, all at once, the dark, broad pinions bent slightly upward and curved sharply so that they seemed half-closed, the long, stiff-shafted tail opened like a fan, the burly body of the great bird tilted forward, the strong, yellow feet were thrust forward and downward with widely opened claws. Next moment the cloven air sang the wild, keen song of the royal eagle plunging for his prey.

The shoveller drake, swimming desperately, was now some twenty feet from the lagoon's eastern margin. There a willow-grown bank, bordered with a dense growth of tall reeds springing from the marginal water, extended between the lagoon and the river. The close-growing reeds would provide a respite and perhaps safety if the drake could reach them; but that sanctuary seemed as unattainable now as if it were twenty miles instead of twenty feet away.

The drake had made one serious mistake, a mistake which seemed certain to prove fatal. Minutes

before, he should have sought safety beneath the surface where he could cling to some submerged grass root or reed stem until his breath failed or the eagle had passed on. It was too late for this expedient now. His broken pinion hampered him sadly whenever he tried to force his buoyant body under water; and only an infinitesimal moment was left to him. If he tried to dive now those trenchant talons, already yawning for their prey, would sink deep into his back before the water closed over him.

In that final infinitesimal moment a strange chance intervened. The shoveller did not know that, in the densest growth of reeds close to the water's edge, round yellow eyes, set in a long, narrow, snakelike head, had watched, at first with languid interest, this drama of the river flats. He did not know that, at the moment when the gray tyrant half-closed his wings and shot downward through the singing air, sudden fear had flamed in those eyes, and the long javelin-bill in front of the snake-like head had sagged open with fright. Neither the fleeing duck nor the plunging eagle was aware that a great blue heron had been standing motionless in the reeds, until, with a terrified squawk, the tall bird spread its ash-blue wings and, with craning neck and trailing legs, flapped upward.

The heron had been facing the lagoon. Either

there was no time to change his position before taking flight, or else the stiff, dense stems, hedging him in on every side, governed the direction of his take-off. At any rate, when he flapped upward above the reed-tops with a hoarse, long-drawn croak of panic, the first hurried strokes of his pinions placed him squarely in the plunging eagle's path.

For a hundredth of a second his ash-blue bulk, the wings spread wide, the long neck stretched to its utmost extent, loomed almost directly over the swimming shoveller and not more than fifteen feet above him. Next moment the eagle, hurtling downward at cannon ball speed, crashed full into the heron.

The great, loosely-knit bird crumpled, collapsed—a broken, shapeless mass of blood-spattered, ashy feathers. Before the gray tyrant, lashing the air furiously, had recovered from the surprise and shock of the collision, the shoveller drake was hidden amid the crowding reed stems.

With the wild things, as a rule, fear is a shadow which comes suddenly and passes quickly. For perhaps ten minutes the shoveller remained in the cover of the reeds, resting quietly in the shallow water lapping amid the smooth, straight stems. Then he turned, paddled back to the open, and head-

ing out toward the center of the lagoon, resumed his interrupted breakfast.

Already a small squadron of pintails had returned, and already the great fleets of coots had moved out again from the marginal waters so that they covered the lower part of the lagoon practically from shore to shore. There was no need for the shoveller to search the air in order to assure himself that the danger had passed. The careless confidence of the coots and pintails was a sufficient assurance, and, the danger having vanished, the fear which it had inspired had vanished also.

Yet the surface of the lagoon bore evidence of how real that danger had been, how well-founded was that fear. Twenty feet from the belt of reeds fringing the bank floated the carcass of the great blue heron which had met death by so strange and so dramatic an accident. The shoveller, after he had made out what it was, never glanced at it again. But if a man had examined the carcass, he would have found it smashed almost to a pulp by the terrific impact of that strange encounter in the air; and he would have noted, too, that the eagle, disappointed in his quest for choicer meat, had not fed upon the heron, but had left it contemptuously where it fell.

These details, however, were of no interest to the crippled shoveller, or to the other feathered

denizens of the lagoon, and none of them paid more than momentary attention to the floating mass of tousled feathers and shattered flesh and bone which afforded such impressive proof of their enemy's power. Swiftly the population of the pool increased. From the open water where he was feeding, surrounded by squadrons of boisterous, quacking mallards and gentle, soft-voiced teal, the shoveller drake could view a vast expanse of sky. He saw against the bright blue of the heavens, no longer obscured by mist, thousands of ducks of many kinds, not only the more abundant species like those feeding near him, but also widgeon and green-winged teal and blue-bills even more numerous this morning than the mallards. Buffleheads, too, he saw in small numbers, lovers of the saltwater bays and inlets but questing inland to-day because a winter gale was sweeping the coast.

Flock after flock of all these varied forms shot at express-train speed across the field of his vision, to swerve, wheel, circle and finally settle in some one of the innumerable ponds or lagoons scattered everywhere over the broad river marshes and the watery flats. Yet in all that feathered concourse the shoveller drake saw not one duck of his own kind.

No hunter could tell why in some winters shovellers were common, while in other years scarcely

a shoveller could be found among all the legions of ducks congregated along the Low Country rivers. This winter was of the latter sort. Countless thousands of other ducks fed in the freshwater marshes and the flooded rice lands, but the shoveller regiments had chosen a different feeding ground.

At first the lone drake's searching of the air had no more specific motive than a vague but persistent longing for the companionship of his own species. Of late, however, this longing had become more definite, more poignant. Though winter still had many weeks to run, already he had donned his nuptial dress, already the mating instinct was strong in him. When he scanned the sky now, he was not looking for a flock of shovellers but for a female shoveller, for a mate whom he might woo and win in anticipation of that joyful honeymoon journey in the spring to the far-off northern lake where they would build their nest and rear their young.

Day after day the crippled drake had awaited the coming of that mate. Day after day he had waited and watched in vain. On this day also his search seemed doomed to failure. The sun reached and passed its zenith. The short winter afternoon faded and the night shut down. For hours the drake slept, his head resting on his back, his wide, spade-like bill half buried in his plumage. A large part of the night, however, he spent in feeding, paddling

swiftly along, his head half-submerged, straining water and mud through the comb-like teeth of his bill.

All about him in the darkness he heard the voices of feathered myriads, the hoarse or nasal tones of other ducks of half a dozen kinds, the incessant, infinitely varied conversation of the coots. Dawn came, and the mists of morning, then rosy sunlight melting the mists. Again the lone shoveller heard, far away across the marshes, that rolling thunder of innumerable wings which announced that the tyrant was abroad. But on this morning the thunder came no nearer. The big gray eagle was seeking his prey a little farther to the northward where the flats were wider and even more populous.

The morning hours passed quietly with no hint of notable developments in store. Then, just before noon, the great event befell.

The crippled drake saw her when she was half a mile away, a mere speck against the sky, seemingly indistinguishable at that distance from the hundreds of other ducks dotting the air. Instantly the pupils of his eyes contracted and their golden circlets glowed like flame. Straight onward she came, flying almost as fast as a teal, guided by chance or fate to the one pool in all that wilderness of marsh where another of her kind awaited her. Probably she saw the drake before she actually

alighted, for suddenly she swerved in the air and came to rest close beside him where he floated in a little open space in the midst of a great raft of coots.

Much as he had longed for her, impatiently as he had awaited her, he took her coming very calmly. With a low guttural "konk, konk," he swam slowly up to her, his head and neck held high, jerking his bill upward. She acknowledged his greeting by bobbing her head, and for some minutes the pair swam slowly in circles. Then, without further demonstration, the shoveller drake led his demure gray-brown sweetheart towards a shallow spot near the lagoon's margin where the soft, slimy mud was particularly rich in snails.

Within an hour of their meeting death struck close by them, so close that they could almost feel the wind from his wings. The tyrant was abroad again. Straight towards their pool that ominous thunder of pinions rolled across the flats as flock after flock of ducks rose and fled from the path of the eagle. The crippled drake, remembering suddenly his narrow escape of the day before, began swimming rapidly towards the reeds, while around him the coot fleet scattered and broke, and with a hiss and a roar of whirring pinions the duck squadrons bounded upward. Close behind the drake swam his mate, bound to him by an instinct even

stronger than the terror which urged her to spread her wings and fly.

This time the tyrant came more swiftly, driving through the air with powerful surging strokes which forced his big body forward at high speed. Ten feet behind the two swimming shovellers a coot gave a shrill cackling cry, opened his wings and struggled to lift himself from the surface. A dead weight pulled him back, a weight which clung to his right foot and held him fast. Desperately his wings beat the water, making a mighty commotion; and the tyrant, poising at that instant fifty feet above the pool, half closed his broad marbled pinions and plunged.

The female shoveller dived; the crippled drake, hampered by his broken wing, got himself under water at last. But the fierce eyes of the tyrant had not been fixed upon either of the shovellers. His target was the struggling coot; and the latter, unable either to dive or to fly because of the big terrapin which had fastened itself to his foot, was gripped and crushed in an instant by the tyrant's long curved claws. A moment the eagle's dark-gray wings labored mightily, their serrated tips brushing the water. Then the terrapin's hold gave way and the tyrant heaved upward with his prize.

Day followed day in the long, marsh-encircled

lagoon beside the river: days of placid enjoyment of the lagoon's rich stores of food: days of sudden alarms and thrilling adventures. Often the two shovellers saw the gray tyrant. Three times in as many weeks the crippled drake narrowly escaped those lethal talons. But his injured wing was healing; though he could not fly, he could dive more easily and he had learned to thwart the hunting eagle by disappearing promptly beneath the surface. His mate, too, seemed to understand that he could now fend for himself in his own way. Generally when the tyrant appeared she took wing with the other ducks, returning after the eagle had passed on.

There were other enemies besides the tyrant. Once, as the two shovellers dabbled for tiny molluscs close to the reed-bordered bank between the lagoon and the river, a mink sprang at them from a clump of jocko bushes. Wildcats, raccoons and foxes walked this bank by night, and more than once the shovellers heard in the darkness a shrill, tragic, choking cry which told them that some unwary coot, venturing ashore after nightfall, had met a bloody end.

When the tyrant himself did not come, there were wide-winged haunters of the marshes who could frighten although they could not harm. The great blue herons passing from time to time over the

lagoon; the turkey vultures sweeping and soaring against the sky; the long-tailed marsh harriers searching the reedy plains for the small furred and feathered game on which they fed—all these, as they swung over, cast swift-moving shadows upon the waters, shadows which spread sudden fright because they might be cast by the tyrant's wings.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly the mild Low Country winter changed to spring. Along the edges of the woods far away across the marshes swamp maples flamed a brilliant red; a mist of green clothed the willows on the old ricefield banks; in the high air tree swallows swarmed like gnats; still higher, a mere speck against the sky, the first water turkey of the season drew circles between white pinnacles of cloud.

The frog choruses swelled louder and louder; the thicket edges rang with the songs of birds; golden jessamine, dogwood and Cherokee rose glowed and glimmered in the swamps. The first ospreys came, the first martins, company after company of migrating white herons. These and many other travelers from the lower South brought new life to the river marshes; but as these lovers of warmth increased, the duck legions diminished.

Flock after flock took wing and returned no more. The hardy mallards went first; then the pintails and the green-winged teal. One by one the

squadrons of widgeons and bluebills began their long journey. In a single night all the marsh lagoons and flooded rice lands bordering the river were almost emptied of coots. Soon, of all the myriads of ducks which had spent the winter along the river flats, only a few small flocks of blue-winged teal, a half dozen belated widgeons or baldpates and the two shovellers remained.

The wind, which for days had blown from the east, swung southward. Suddenly the air grew languid and warm. The lagging baldpates disappeared. Coral-billed gallinules supplanted the rear-guard of the coots. An hour after the next sunrise the last flock of teal mounted as though at a signal, circled high, then headed away to the north. The shoveller drake and his mate watched them go; and just before they disappeared in the distance, the female shoveller, without a glance at her partner or a sound of farewell, bounded upward and whirred away in pursuit.

From a dead cedar at the edge of the pineland, far away across the marshes, a hawk pitched forward, opened long pointed wings, and shot northward at amazing speed—the speed of the peregrine falcon on the track of his prey. He passed like a winged projectile not more than a hundred yards from the lagoon of the shoveller drake. The latter did not see him, did not know that at the very out-

set of her journey his mate must run a race with death. He knew only that his mate had left him and that she would not return—that, joyously, eagerly, exultantly, she had mounted at last to that broad blue road of the sky which for weeks had beckoned her, a road which led northward and ever northward to the far-off sloughs and prairie lakes where the wild duck myriads bred.

The golden circlets rimming the crippled drake's pupils glowed a brilliant orange. Rearing his body upward, he stood for an instant upon the surface of the water, his wings fanning the air. Not for weeks had he tried his pinions, dreading the burning agony which he had learned to associate with every effort to fly; but now his wings fanned faster and faster, and suddenly they lifted him. For a hundred yards he flew on, barely topping the taller reeds and sword rushes. Then he slumped abruptly downward, plunging with a splash into a flooded ricefield separated by a strip of marsh from the lagoon where he had spent so many weeks.

A month passed; a month of gnawing loneliness and incessant restlessness, spent dabbling in flooded ricefields and shallow marsh ponds which he shared with noisy gallinules, long-necked water turkeys, stately milk-white egrets, herons of several kinds and tall white and black ibises. He seldom saw the tyrant now because, with the departure of

the duck armies, the gray eagle had devoted himself to other prey. Day followed day uneventfully. Then, one still sunny morning as the lone drake feasted on water snails along the edge of a little peninsula of reeds, a black log lying half submerged near the margin came suddenly to life.

As the 'gator rushed, the drake, with a hoarse startled cry, opened his wings and launched upward from the surface. On and on he flew, rising higher and higher; on and on for fifty yards, a hundred, five hundred. His wings beat evenly and strongly. No sudden weakness or numbness assailed him. At first he flew due south, the direction in which he happened to be headed when the 'gator charged him; but gradually he swung in a wide half-circle until his long bill and slender neck pointed north.

The green marshes and the shimmering blue lagoons slid past beneath him. Far in front, a thousand miles away, a placid prairie lake, where perhaps his mate was swimming with her little ones, beckoned and lured him on.

The tyrant was taking his ease. In the frosty, windless upper air, so far above the earth that to the eyes of a man he would have appeared no larger than a gnat, he floated on outstretched wings as lightly as the white wisps of cloud drifting near him. This was his true kingdom, this lofty illim-

itable solitude; and it was there, "in those blue tracts above the thunder," that he had his throne.

He was most regal, most kinglike, when, as though contemptuous of the earth and of all earth-bound creatures, he soared to heights unattainable by vulture or hawk or heron and from that dizzy altitude looked languidly down upon the varicolored world of green forests, blue lagoons and silvery serpentine rivers and creeks. It was then that he was like a throned monarch; for it was then that he was most completely at his ease, most secure in the strength that could lift him to such heights, most arrogant in the assurance of undisputed sovereignty. On earth there were enemies against whom he must be always on guard. At the lower levels of the air there were those who, while they could not injure him, might annoy him as a buzzing insect may annoy a lion. But the upper air was his. None ventured there except certain ones of his own royal race, and with these kindred kings he lived in peace.

Often it was peace that the tyrant sought when he mounted to these lofty fastnesses—the peace of boundless silence, of freedom from all possible danger, of complete mental relaxation. There was no need for watchfulness amid the clouds. There all his senses could rest; and there his wide wings, motionless except for occasional slight quiverings of their flexible tips, could perform their function al-

most automatically, without direction from his brain. Without fatigue, almost without effort, he could remain aloft for hours, sailing in great circles or wide ellipses, keeping the same level or, if the air currents were favorable, spiraling gradually upward until he approached the invisible upper frontier of his airy kingdom beyond which even the eagle cannot soar.

On this bright mid-spring morning drowsiness possessed him. Spring was a season of plenty when his unwilling purveyors, the ospreys, were numerous and industrious, yielding him a rich tribute of finny spoils. Although in winter he varied his fare by catching unwary coots or wounded ducks, fish had always been his favorite food; and now, with fish plentiful and easily obtained and with the labors of the nesting season behind him, the tyrant had abundant time for idleness and rest. Shortly after sunrise he had breakfasted upon a large mullet which an indignant osprey had surrendered to him. Then, languidly, lazily he had climbed to his high kingdom to spend the rest of the morning circling somnolently just under the motionless white clouds.

For nearly two hours the gray eagle had been soaring thus, more than half-asleep. Suddenly, his drowsiness fell from him. Far below him and to the south, a black speck was moving swiftly through the air. To his far-sighted eyes that speck had the

form of a duck, a duck whose wide, flat bill and slender neck identified it at once as a shoveller. Its course would bring it in a few minutes directly under the eagle; and apparently not until it was directly under him did the tyrant reach his decision.

Until that moment the eagle, though he watched the oncoming duck keenly with eyes that glowed fiercely under their beetling brows, continued his placid soaring. Then, as though he had become suddenly aware of something unperceived or unrealized until that instant, he half-closed his wings and slid downward through the hissing air.

The golden eyes of the shoveller drake, speeding northward at last on his long-delayed journey to the distant Canadian lake which all his life had been his summer home, searched the air lane ahead of him and the sky spaces above. Yet those eyes had not seen a certain sinister dark spot which had been moving slowly in wide circles perhaps a thousand feet or more above the line of the drake's flight.

The shoveller had missed that dark spot soaring just under the billowy white clouds because at the moment his attention was otherwise occupied. A half-hour had elapsed since he had begun his journey; and although at first the swiftness and evenness of his wingbeats seemed to prove beyond all doubt

that his injured pinion was now as strong and serviceable as ever, it was already evident that this appearance of completely restored strength was deceptive.

No human eye could have detected at this stage anything abnormal in the drake's manner of flight. But the drake himself knew that all was not well with him, that he could not fly as he was accustomed to fly; and the marvelous eyes of the gray eagle, looking straight down upon the drake as the latter passed far below him, perceived immediately that this was a duck whose powers of flight had been impaired. It was this discovery which of a sudden had determined the tyrant's course of action, and brought him shooting down like a feathered meteor from the upper air.

Possibly it was sound, not sight, which first apprised the shoveller of his peril. Possibly he heard, above the rush of the wind through his own pinions, a high, thin, wailing note the meaning of which he knew—the keen, wild song which the wind sings when it is smitten and cleft by the hard edges of the eagle's wings as the king of birds plunges upon his prey. More likely the drake's golden eyes first warned him of the danger, flaring orange-red with terror as they lit suddenly upon the dark down-rushing bulk behind and above him.

If, until then, that distant prairie lake where

perhaps his mate dabbled with her little ones had beckoned him, the vision was instantly blotted out. Panic swept over him like a wave, gripped and stabbed him like death's claw. Yet even in his panic he did the one thing that might save him.

Directly beneath him lay a wide plain of river marsh; but not more than a quarter of a mile to his right a long loop of the wide, winding river glittered in the sun. This was his haven if he could reach it; and instantly he wheeled in the air and, tilting his body sharply forward, drove with all the strength of his pinions directly towards the river's smooth expanse. Beneath that silvery mirror-like surface life awaited him. Towards that goal he ran his race with death.

It was a brave race. Until its final tenth of a second, its issue was in doubt. The drake's swift maneuver, his sudden wheel to the right, gained him some twenty yards. For a moment he no longer heard that thin, keen, wailing note behind and above him. But almost instantly he heard it again, and swiftly it sharpened to a hiss which in turn became a loud, angry, rustling noise like the rushing of wind through bending tree-tops.

Fifteen feet above the surface of the river the race ended—ended with a savage downward thrust of widespread blue-black talons and a smother of great gray wings furiously lashing the air. The

gray tyrant swept buoyantly onward and upward, gripping in his claws the white and russet body of the drake, the long green neck dangling limply. Three miles away, in a tall pine on a wooded island in the marsh, there was an abandoned eagle nest which the tyrant sometimes used as a storehouse for food. Towards this nest he set his course.

The Elk of the Overhills

THE ELK OF THE OVERHILLS

AL MAYNE saw Awi Agwa for the first time one clear, cold autumn morning on Sani'gilagi, the highest of the Cowees. Almayne was a young man then. He was a wilderness hunter, a trader in peltries, an Indian fighter when the war drums throbbed in the Overhills; but not many years before, he had been a schoolboy in England, with a liking for books. From the great precipice of Sani'gilagi he had just watched a crimson September sunrise, and the glory of it had stirred him deeply.

That was why he did not kill Awi Agwa that first day. From his camp near the summit of the mountain he had walked a few hundred yards down the ridge in search of water. In a small level meadow on the crest of the ridge he came suddenly upon a giant elk, the largest elk that he had ever seen, standing on the very verge of the precipice, gazing out over the wide expanse of forested hills and valleys. Forty yards behind the elk, the long yellow form of a puma, stretched lazily upon a flat sunny rock, caught his eye.

Neither animal saw or scented the other. Neither

was aware of the hunter. Almayne chose the elk as his target. Crouching behind a boulder at the meadow's upper end, he gazed along his rifle barrel at the superb stately figure sharply outlined against the sky. He had seen hundreds of elk, thousands of buffalo, perhaps tens of thousands of deer; but in five years in the wilderness he had seen nothing so magnificent as this huge, perfectly proportioned, nobly antlered elk bull posed like a majestic statue of golden-bronze on the brink of the abyss.

A sudden repugnance surged up in him. It seemed to him that the thing which he was about to do would be murder or worse. He did not stop to analyze the impulse or to argue against it. He swung the long rifle slowly to the right until his gray-blue eyes, sighting along the barrel, saw not the elk but the tawny shoulder of the puma. His finger touched the trigger gently. The puma bounded forward, stood rigid, toppled sideways and lay still.

Almayne scarcely glanced at the sprawling body of the big lion-like cat. At the roar of the long heavy rifle the elk whirled in his tracks so that he faced the hunter, head high, antlers laid back along his shaggy neck. For half a minute he stood motionless. Then he saw Almayne's head and shoulders thrust up above the boulder. Instantly the great bull whirled again, raced in a plunging gallop across the open and vanished amid the trees beyond.

Almayne, as he skinned the puma, wondered at himself. The hide of that huge elk would have been worth five times as much as the puma hide, which was rather a poor one. Moreover, if he had killed the elk, he could have had breakfast before starting his day's journey, whereas now he must wait until he could knock over a grouse or a rabbit on his way down the mountain. He was ashamed of his own foolishness. Nevertheless, a week later he told the story to Julah the Fox as they talked by a campfire beside the Great Path far down among the foothills.

The old Indian heard him through and sat silent for many minutes, staring into the fire with stony, expressionless face. At last his lips opened.

"My brother knows," he said in his own tongue, "that I am a shaman as well as a warrior. I will read the omen. My brother Almayne was foolish. He did a foolish thing. He camped on Sani'gilagi, the holy mountain. The Spirit was angered. He sent an elk and a puma. Klandaghi the puma is sacred. Awi Agwa the elk is proper game. The Spirit bewitched Almayne so that he killed Klandaghi and let Awi Agwa go unharmed."

Almayne suppressed a yawn.

"And what will come of it, Julah?" he asked gravely.

"I know not," replied the red man. "I am not

of the Adawehi, the Great Wizards. But evil will come of it. There is a curse upon my brother Almayne. I cannot read the curse; but when Awi Agwa shows himself again, let Almayne kill him."

Julah the Fox went on his way at daylight. He was returning to his home in the Cherokee nation in the valley of Ocona Lufta under the eastern rampart of the Smokies. Almayne, on the other hand, was bound for Charles Town, having with him three pack ponies laden with beaver skins; and the two had met by chance on the Great Path, as the long wilderness trail from the mountains to the sea was known. Almayne, being in no hurry, slept late. The sun was two hours high when he resumed his journey.

Riding his sorrel Chicasaw mare behind the plodding pack ponies, he watched with indifferent yet observant eyes the familiar panorama of the forest's teeming life. The trail wound serpent-like amid the wooded hills—a narrow road but well trodden by the hoofs of the pack trains that now used it in increasing numbers and by the moccasined feet of Indians who had traveled it perhaps for centuries before the white men came. On either side lay the forest, virgin, untouched by the axe—a park-like forest of gigantic broad-leaved trees, oak, hickory, beech and many others, whose branches

mingling overhead cast a shade too dense for undergrowth to subsist. Down the long shadowy vistas amid the column-like tree-trunks Almayne's gray eyes roamed restlessly, viewing many things.

Everywhere he saw deer. In this paradise of the foothills the whitetails still swarmed in incalculable numbers—in numbers which seemed not to have diminished at all since the first white hunters had pushed inland from the coast. Once, far away, at the farther end of a sun-dappled forest aisle, he saw a troop of nine buffalo traveling northward in single file behind a shaggy old bull; and once, when the forest opened to enclose one of those beautiful green meadows or forest-prairies which were scattered here and there through the primeval woods, he saw a much larger herd, fifty or sixty animals at least, standing shoulder-deep in lush maiden canes and wild pea vines. Ahead of him a lumbering black bear crossed the trail. A half-mile farther along, a lynx which had been lying along a beech limb almost overhanging the road, leaped lightly to the ground and bounded away into the forest.

Most of these Almayne viewed with languid interest. They were the common things of life, the everyday sights of the wilderness. The buffalo held his attention while they were within view, for they were less abundant here to the eastward of the Appalachians than in the almost unknown coun-

try beyond the mountain barrier; but he scarcely turned his head to look at the troops of deer. His thoughts were busy with other matters.

These were good times, he reflected, these times when the Great Path could be traveled in safety without fear of ambushade. From Charles Town to Tellequo beyond the Overhills where Moytoy the red Emperor reigned, peace prevailed along the wilderness road. Cherokee, Choctaw, Muskogee and Catawba called the white man friend. How long this friendship would last no man could tell. It sufficed Almayne that for the present peace was secure.

A sharp, loud, whining, singing sound shrilled for a fraction of an instant in his ear. An arrow had whizzed above his right shoulder, missing his throat by an inch. Even as he wheeled his pony, he felt something touch the fringed sleeve of his buckskin shirt just above the elbow. A second shaft had grazed his arm, barely scratching the skin. Bending low on the sorrel mare's back, he dug his heels into her flanks and talked to her in the guttural tongue that she knew best.

"Faster, my little Martin-bird!" he whispered. "Faster, my little Tlutlu! Faster, faster, faster!"

Tlutlu the Martin-bird raced as she had seldom raced before. But she could not outrun the arrows. Another shaft whined past Almayne, another and

yet another. He heard the crash of a rifle, the thud of a bullet against a tree-trunk ahead of him. Again a rifle roared behind him; the mare staggered and nearly fell. Almayne knew what had happened. A bullet had struck her right hind leg low down and had splintered the bone or cut a tendon. Gamely she struggled on; but Almayne, swinging his leg over her neck, leaped from the saddle, landing lightly as a cat. He struck the ground running.

"Goodbye, little Tlutlu," he cried. Lips tight, eyes blazing, his long rifle gripped in his right hand, he dashed into the forest to the right of the trail.

At his best speed he ran on and on through the woods, already fairly sure that he was safe. He had a good start and was fast on his feet, and from the slope of the land he judged that a creek or river lay ahead of him. Dense belts of cane bordered the foothill streams and in a canebrake a hundred Indians could not find him. He would be able, he thought, to gain the shelter of the canes, for he knew that his assailants were unmounted. A quick glance down the trail behind him just before the mare was struck had identified them instantly—a dozen or more Senecas, warriors of the Northern Iroquois, who had traveled far beyond their own boundaries to raid the Southern trading paths.

These raiders from the North traveled always on foot because they could the more easily lose them-

selves in the forest; and they would attempt no extended pursuit because they were in the country of their enemies. So Almayne reflected as he ran, glancing often over his shoulder, searching for shadowy brown figures leaping after him amid the shadowy trees. Once for an instant he thought he saw them, but the swift-moving forms which he glimpsed were a troop of deer, crossing his trail from the left, running fast, their white tails erect, as though something had frightened them. Almayne bore to the right and ran on without pause. A quarter of a mile more and he saw ahead of him down the wooded slope the dark green of the canes.

For an hour he lay in the canebrake, brooding over the blow that had fallen. Little Tlutlu was lost to him. The pack ponies were lost. Their rich cargo of beaver pelts, for which he had traveled to the country of the Chicasaws beyond the Blue Mountains, would be carried to the lodges of the Iroquois and bartered finally to the traders of Canada or New York. Presently he smiled a wry smile.

"Old Julah was right," he said to himself. "The evil came quickly."

When he judged it safe to move, he rose and for a mile followed a deer path winding through the canebrake parallel with the creek. Then he turned to the left along another deer path and, emerging from the canes, set off westward through the forest.

It was perhaps three hours later when his quick eye caught a slight movement amid the tree trunks ahead. Next moment a huge yellow-brown bulk heaved upward from the ground, a giant bull elk with vast, wide-spreading antlers.

Almayne stood rigid with amazement. The thing seemed too strange to be true; yet he knew that it was true, for he did not believe that there was another elk like this one in the whole wilderness of America.

"Awi Agwa!" he murmured. "The bull of Sani'gilagi!"

It was a long shot, a very long shot for the rifle of those days, a marvelously accurate weapon but of comparatively short range. Almayne knew that the elk had seen him but that the animal, puzzled by his immobility, was not sure of what he was. He raised the rifle so slowly that the great bull watching him in the middle distance could not detect the movement. He aimed long and carefully, calculating the necessary elevation, figuring the force of the wind.

At the report the elk plunged forward, wheeled and galloped straight away from the hunter. Almayne had not followed the trail fifty yards when he found what he expected to find—a blotch of blood upon the fallen leaves.

That was a winter long remembered in the Cherokee mountain towns. Some named it the Winter of the Unending Snow; others recalled it as the Winter of the Wolves. With the first light snowfall in mid-autumn the wolf invasion began; such wolves and such wolf packs as had never before been known in the Overhills. All that white winter, that winter of pitiless Arctic cold, they harried the deer of the mountain woods, and more than once, when hunger had maddened them and the odds were in their favor, they took human prey. It was their fangs that tore the life out of Dagantu, that tall war captain of the Cherokees, who met his end in a dark gap of the mountains, known ever afterwards as the Defile of Waya, the Defile of the Wolves.

The first snow of that winter—or, rather, of that autumn, for it was early October—fell upon Awi Agwa, the great bull elk, not more than an hour after Almayne had wounded him. Awi Agwa was unaware of the falling flakes which melted as quickly as they fell. He was mad with the pain which had stabbed him suddenly in his right shoulder, the pain which now stabbed him at every stride. Almayne, plodding onward through the forest, three miles behind the elk, frowned as the light rain, which had been falling for half an hour, turned suddenly white. If the snowfall continued tracking

would be impossible; and Almayne had set himself the task of tracking this elk down.

Outwardly he scoffed at Julah's warning of a curse, but like many of the frontier hunters he had a secret respect for the lore of the red shamans and conjurers. The evil which Julah had predicted had come with impressive swiftness: at one stroke Almayne had lost his horse, his pack ponies and his beaver pelts. Julah had seemed to expect that the giant elk would show himself again; and, most strangely, Almayne had encountered the animal at least sixty miles from Sani'gilagi where he had seen the great bull for the first time. This was an astonishing confirmation of the old Indian's prophecy. It would be as well, Almayne felt, to kill this elk, this Awi Agwa, as Julah had advised; and since the animal was wounded, the task might not be hard.

Awi Agwa traveled northwestward. Of all the deer kind, the elk when frightened is the swiftest, the most enduring. The roar of Almayne's rifle that first morning on Sani'gilagi had started the giant bull on a journey which lasted for hours and which brought him down from the mountains into the upper foothills. It was the season of mating. He had left his own cows on Sani'gilagi; so in search of other cows Awi Agwa had ranged far and wide through the foothills until a rifle had roared again and a bullet had plowed its way deep into his right

shoulder. The mountains were his home, and now he turned back to them. Fleeing from this new danger, he struck northwestward once more.

All that afternoon he traveled. At first his gait was a swinging trot faster than the trot of a horse. But at every step pain racked his wounded shoulder, and soon the trot became a walk. Yet, even walking, he traveled fast. Almayne, studying the tracks—the snowfall had lasted less than half an hour—saw that the elk had changed his gait and felt more confident than ever that the chase would not be a long one. He found no more blood on the trail, and abandoned hope of overtaking his quarry before nightfall. But Awi Agwa, he thought, would hardly travel throughout the night. Not knowing that he was pursued, sooner or later the elk would lie down to rest, and when he rose to continue his journey the wounded shoulder would have stiffened.

Well after nightfall he lay down. Before dawn he rose, staggered, stood swaying precariously. He had forgotten his wound, for the pain had all but vanished. But the moment he stood on his legs, it stabbed him again, and when he tried to walk he found that he could barely move his right foreleg.

Sudden panic seized him. Without stopping to feed, he set off northwestward. For a while he hobbled and stumbled as though his foreleg were broken, but gradually, although the stabs of pain

continued with each stride, his pace became faster, his gait less labored. When, hours later, Almayne reached the spot where the elk had bedded and studied the tracks beyond it, the hunter read in those tracks the story of a long bitter struggle, a struggle with pain and with paralysis worse than pain, a struggle in which Awi Agwa had won.

It was early in the forenoon of the second day that Awi Agwa learned that he was pursued. From far behind him came a sound which he recognized at once—the dull boom of a distant rifle. Almayne, who had breakfasted only on some parched corn which he carried in a small bag attached to his belt, had shot a wild turkey to satisfy his appetite. The big bird, perched on an oak limb almost directly over his head, had tempted him irresistibly and he had killed it regardless of the possibility that the elk might hear the shot.

Awi Agwa heard and understood—knew that his enemy was on his trail. He had halted to graze on certain succulent weeds carpeting the ground in a grove of huge beeches. He had pulled scarcely a dozen mouthfuls when the far-off boom of the rifle reached him; and instantly his antlered head jerked upward and he lurched forward in the slashing gallop which is the elk's fastest gait.

It was a rash effort. At the first plunge intolerable pain shot through his wounded shoulder, his

right foreleg doubled under him and he fell. He was up again in an instant, but the fall had reopened his wound and now a stream of blood trickled down his leg.

Again he settled to the stiff-legged walk which was the only gait allowed him by his injured shoulder. He had traveled perhaps three miles farther when he heard another sound behind him, the hunting cry of a wolf pack, a pack which had smelled blood. This time Awi Agwa failed to understand. He knew wolves and did not fear them; and neither instinct nor reason told him that the blood which these gray hunters scented was his own. Nor could he know that these wolves were of a kind that he had never seen before—the vanguard of that army of grim, gaunt, long-fanged killers who were to sweep down upon the Overhills that winter from the Northern forests already deep in ice and snow.

Nearer and nearer came the savage wailing chorus. Awi Agwa passed now through an empty forest, a forest which seemed lifeless and deserted because the deer which peopled it had disappeared. He saw no more herds of whitetails grazing in the forest glades; and he knew that the deer, smaller and far less formidable than himself, had scattered to right and left out of the path of the approaching pack. For half a mile he came upon no living thing except the common birds of the woods. Then, fifty

yards ahead of him and to his left, he noticed a small black bear sitting on his haunches, his head cocked on one side, listening.

By now, the wolf chorus filled the woods. The bear ambled quickly to the foot of a young hickory and began to climb. Yet not until the danger was almost upon him did Awi Agwa realize that he faced a battle.

He faced it confidently. The wolves of the Overhills had never molested him seriously, and though he had never seen a wolf pack as large as this one, he did not expect a determined attack. It was fortunate for him that the crisis came when it did. He turned at bay in a narrow rock-bound pocket of a hillside where his rear was safe. He might have traveled twenty miles through the foothills without finding another spot so well adapted to his need; and he knew as he waited that with his wide-spreading antlers and flint-edged hoofs guarding his front and flanks, these wolves must be bold indeed to press the assault home.

He did not know or did not realize that a wolf's eye is marvelously quick to detect a wounded animal and to appraise the extent of its wound—that, as he stood at bay, his right foreleg dangled as though it were broken and that it was caked with blood. They paused in front of him for a moment; twenty-one gray, gaunt, shaggy brutes, grimly silent

now, red tongues lolling between long white fangs. Then, at their leader's signal, they charged.

Luck was with Awi Agwa. A loose stone slipped under the hind foot of the foremost wolf, and his leap fell short. For a fraction of a second he reared on his hind legs directly in front of the elk's lowered head, and in that fraction of a second Awi Agwa's long forward-pointing pikes ripped into him behind the ribs and disembowelled him. In an instant the thing was done; and in another instant the elk's heavy many-spiked antlers swinging to right and left crashed down upon the wolves leaping at his throat from both sides.

In the swollen shaggy neck of the giant bull there was vast power. His huge antlers, six feet long, extraordinarily massive, bristling with polished sharp-pointed tines, would have seemed to the eye of a man unwieldy weapons; but in Awi Agwa there was strength enough to wield them, and he wielded them not only with strength but with instinctive skill. And again luck played a part. In that mad whirling mêlée he could not always aim his blows but struck more or less blindly; and it was mainly chance which brought the beam of a descending antler squarely down upon the back of a she-wolf's neck just behind the skull.

She staggered ten steps and stood swaying, legs wide apart. Suddenly she lifted her head and

howled—a wild quavering cry of agony. In an instant the milling gray mob around Awi Agwa melted as every wolf leaped clear. For some seconds they stood watching the she-wolf, long white teeth gleaming in snarling jaws, eyes aglitter with savage expectation. Then, apparently for the first time, they saw the dying beast that Awi Agwa ~~had~~ disembowelled dragging himself across the ground fifteen feet to the right.

Three of them made a rush for him, but the rest still waited as though transfixed, their pitiless eyes fixed upon the she-wolf which had uttered that quavering howl. She stood motionless except for the slight swaying of her body; but suddenly she lurched forward and began to run in circles, her head bent sharply to one side. Round and round she ran, faster and faster, the fierce expectant eyes following her with strange intensity. Then down she went as though a shot had bowled her over, and in an instant a dozen sets of fangs were rending her carcass.

Awi Agwa, motionless in his tracks, watched the bloody orgy. Instinct kept him where he was, warned him not to leave his position of vantage in the shallow pocket of the hillside. For more than an hour after the feast was over he still stood there facing his foes, while they sat on their haunches in a semi-circle in front of him, unwilling to attack

again now that their hunger was somewhat appeased, yet unwilling also to abandon their prey. Finally a troop of deer approaching from the windward quarter passed within fifty yards before scenting the waiting wolves. In this troop was a doe whose haunch had been badly raked and wrenched by a puma the day before. When the deer, scenting danger at last, wheeled and ran, this doe dropped a little behind.

The siege ended then. Here was game which could be caught after a short chase and which could be pulled down without a battle. Every wolf leaped away in pursuit, and they were scarcely out of sight when Awi Agwa resumed his journey. Even in the excitement of the combat with the pack he had not forgotten the more dreaded enemy before whom, in blind obedience to instinct, he was fleeing towards the mountains.

Almayne had halted to roast and eat some of the breast-meat of the gobbler which he had shot. It was afternoon when he reached the place where Awi Agwa had made his stand. The trampled ground, the blood-spattered litter of leaves, the mangled remnants of the two wolves which the rest of the pack had eaten told the hunter what had happened.

He examined the ground carefully and worked

out to his own satisfaction the details of the battle which had raged there; but what interested him most at the moment was the freshness of Awi Agwa's tracks leading away from the place. Those tracks, he decided, were less than an hour old. With his crippled shoulder hampering his stride the elk could travel, Almayne believed, no faster than he himself could walk. Shouldering his rifle, the tall hunter strode onward, his thoughtful eyes studying the trail.

In the valley of Sequilla, in the shadow of Sani'gilagi, there was a village of the Cherokees. A chief lived there, one Nunda the Moon-Face, who had a roan horse which Almayne coveted. Nunda would sell this stallion if he could get his price; and now that Tlutlu the Martin-bird was lost to him, Almayne wished to bargain for Nunda's roan.

Yet he did not, as he had planned, go straight to Nunda's village. For fifty miles through the foothills Awi Agwa had led him in the direction of the Indian town; but by noon of the third day, when he was in the foothills no longer but well up among the spurs of the Cowees, Almayne realized that he must choose one of two paths. Down the ridge to the west was the way to Nunda's town. Up the ridge and due north went Awi Agwa's trail, heading



evidently for the high humped shoulder of Sani'gilagi itself.

Almayne postponed his choice until he had come to the parting of the ways, debating the question in his mind; but in reality his decision was never in doubt. It was not so much old Julah's warning that now urged him on—though this, too, played a part—as it was his own pride, his self-esteem as a woodsman. This elk had fooled him; the chase had been much longer than he had anticipated. He was on his mettle now. He would follow this trail to its end no matter how far it might lead him; and he was sure that it would not lead him much farther.

He realized now that from the beginning of the chase the elk had been heading for Sani'gilagi, the mountain where Almayne had first seen him and which was evidently his home. Knowing the ways of elk, the hunter was confident that on Sani'gilagi Awi Agwa's flight would end. There the great bull would lie down at last to recoup his strength and give his wounded shoulder time to heal; and there Almayne's opportunity would come.

The hunter swung on up the ridge, his alert eyes searching the sun-speckled vistas ahead. Although he considered it almost certain that Awi Agwa would climb Sani'gilagi before he rested, it was pos-

sible that the elk would choose a bed on the lower slopes.

Almayne was right in regarding this as only a possibility. For more than three years Awi Agwa had found sanctuary on Sani'gilagi's summit. The Cherokees held the mountain sacred because it was a favorite seat of the lightning god and a resort of Tsulkalu, the Slant-Eye, the mythic Master of Game. There was no tribal law against it, yet they seldom hunted on the higher slopes. Hence throughout the summers and the early months of fall Awi Agwa had made Sani'gilagi his stronghold and, so long as he kept to the upper heights, had been unmolested by the red hunters.

It was this refuge which he was now seeking. Once, it was true, an enemy had invaded it, but only once; and a hundred times in the past, when Cherokee bowmen had picked up his trail in the lower valleys, he had found safety by heading for the mountain's summit. Instinct told him that he was pursued, that the enemy who had wounded him still followed his trail. He was tired, desperately tired, and his wounded shoulder throbbed and burned; but he knew that by swinging around the precipitous eastern face of the mountain and ascending the more gradual western slope, he could reach the lofty refuge which was his goal.

Nevertheless, the long climb taxed him sorely.

On the steep ascents his shoulder ached intolerably and grew strangely stiff again. It was mid-afternoon when he reached the upper end of the tributary ridge and faced the short but still steeper climb to the little grassy plateau above the great precipice; and by that time Almayne was less than a mile behind him.

Yet as the danger behind grew more imminent, recollection of it dimmed in the giant bull's mind. Something else had happened to make him forget, or almost forget, the pursuer before whom he had fled for more than fifty miles.

Half way up the ridge he had crossed the trail of an elk herd. They were his own cows, he knew, the cows which he had abandoned temporarily when Almayne's rifle shot on that first day had sent him racing away in terror to the foothills. He had paused only a moment or two to sniff at the day-old tracks, but he had learned, either by sight or scent, that among them was a track which should not have been there—the track of an interloper, a rival bull.

Sudden fury swelled up in him. Thenceforward it was not his fear of the hunter that drove him on. On the heights above him there was another enemy—a usurper to be met and punished.

Two hours before sunset Awi Agwa, toiling up the northern slope of the mountain, reached the

high meadow on the main ridge of Sani'gilagi close to the summit. Before him opened a small grassy plateau, almost circular in shape. On three sides rocks and trees enclosed the place; but to the south the mountainside dropped almost sheer, forming the profoundest precipice of the Cowees. In this lofty pasture poised upon the brink of the vast cliff, Awi Agwa expected to find his cows; and there he found them.

They were there, all eight of them, five of them lying down near the middle of the meadow, the others cropping the grass nearby. Awi Agwa wasted only one glance upon them. At the farther edge of the plateau, on the very verge of the precipice, a wide-antlered bull elk stood gazing out over the panorama of purple hills and valleys spread below him.

Two hundred yards down the wooded western slope Almayne, following in his quarry's tracks, heard Awi Agwa's furious bugling challenge. The elk cows heard it and raised their heads eagerly, their big ears pricked forward. The stalwart bull that was now master of the herd—the usurper that stood in Awi Agwa's look-out place on the precipice's brow—heard it and whirled to meet the danger.

What he saw chilled his blood. The king had come back, the giant elk whose herd he had stolen,

the huge bull that had lorded it over all the other bulls of the Cowees and whose mastery no other bull had dared dispute. He had come back to claim his own; and now he was striding across the open, jaws champing, antlers tossing, eyes red with the frenzy of battle. Panic gripped the usurper. He stood rigid, staring wildly. In another moment he would have turned to run.

In that moment something happened. Suddenly Awi Agwa staggered, halted, stood swaying uncertainly. The last stiff climb up the steep western slope to the plateau had all but exhausted the wounded bull, and now the world went black before him. Almost at once the faintness passed and his vision cleared. But the sharp eyes of the other bull had seen, his cunning brain had understood.

Almayne, half-striding, half-running up the steep mountain side, heard another bugle call above him, a challenge shriller than Awi Agwa's fierce blast but no less angry, no less defiant. A sudden light flared in the hunter's eager eyes. He knew that in the high meadow on the brow of the precipice he would find Awi Agwa in combat with a rival; and he knew that in the fury of battle his victim would be oblivious to all other dangers.

The long hunt was nearly over. The great bull elk of Sani'gilagi had reached his journey's end.

They met almost in the center of the little plateau, met with a resounding clash of antlers which startled the rabbits among the rocks along the meadow's rim. To an onlooker at that moment it would have seemed an unequal battle; for although the usurper was a bull of powerful build and more than normal stature, Awi Agwa was by far the taller and heavier, while his huge antlers dwarfed those of his opponent. Yet a keen-eyed observer would have perceived quickly that in this duel bulk of body and spread of horns were not the only factors.

Unwounded, his powers unimpaired, Awi Agwa would have borne his enemy off his feet in that first charge. As it was, the shock of collision brought triumph to neither side. With Awi Agwa rested the advantage, but it was not decisive.

The usurper was forced back upon his haunches; but he checked the other's onset, recovered himself quickly, held Awi Agwa's antlers in play so that the long prongs could not gore his flanks. Already the usurper knew that he had not ventured too rashly in giving battle to this half-crippled giant. The first shock had given him the measure of Awi Agwa's strength, and now he was not afraid.

Heads down, mouths lolling open and wickedly leering, antlers clashing and grinding, they strove with the fury of demons. For a time Awi Agwa forced his opponent slowly backward. The great

muscles of his forelegs and of his sleek haunches bulged and writhed; in his injured shoulder the torn sinews throbbed with pain which lashed him to frenzy. More maddening even than the pain was the astounding, infuriating fact of failure, failure to overwhelm this rival in the first onset.

Not for years had any bull stood up so long against him. For the first time since the far away days of his youth Awi Agwa's colossal bulk and might had failed to conquer quickly.

It was this that drove him almost insane with rage. Into this first stage of the battle the giant elk threw all the strength he had. Hampered by his hurt shoulder, by the exhaustion resulting from his long journey, he could not overthrow his enemy; but for many minutes he forced the fighting, pushing his opponent backward, lunging and stabbing, twisting his hairy neck, swinging his huge antlers to right and left as he strove to get past his opponent's guard and deliver the swift ripping thrust in the flank which would have ended the fight.

Neither bull knew that the elk cows, which at first had watched the duel with excited interest, were watching it no longer; that suddenly one of them had lifted her head, sniffed the air and galloped off to the right, followed by all the rest. Neither bull was aware of the tall buckskin-clad shape which slipped from tree to tree at the north-

ern edge of the meadow, then boldly darted across the open to an isolated rock scarcely thirty yards from the spot where the combat raged. Neither bull saw the black barrel of the long rifle which was presently thrust out from behind that rock.

Again and again Almayne drew his bead. The tide of battle had turned. Awi Agwa's strength was waning now. He forced the fighting no longer. He stood still, head down, legs braced, holding back his enemy by weight rather than muscle. Calmly, unhurriedly Almayne drew his bead again, lining his sights on the spot behind Awi Agwa's shoulder through which a bullet would plunge straight to the heart.

Yet for a little while longer the hunter delayed the fatal shot. This was a wilderness battle such as few men had ever witnessed. He was unwilling to end it before he must.

A minute the combatants stood motionless, head to head, their antlers interlaced. Then suddenly the usurper launched his attack. He had been glad to rest for a while to recover his wind. Now, knowing that his opponent was done, he would make an end. His swollen neck twisting and writhing, his antlers grinding against those of his adversary, his champing jaws dripping foam, he drove forward with all his strength.

Almayne, his finger crooked about the trigger,

saw Awi Agwa's muscles bulge and strain, saw him rally his remaining strength for a supreme effort, saw that effort fail.

It was a heroic, a heart-breaking effort. Never before in all the years of his kingship had Awi Agwa given ground before a rival bull. He could not realize that he must give ground now. With all the strength that was left to him he struggled against fate.

But at last came the inevitable. For a longer time than Almayne had believed possible the wounded bull held his own; then slowly, foot by foot, he was forced back. More desperately than ever he strained and struggled, but he could not check his adversary's slow, relentless advance.

Almayne knew that now the end was near. Awi Agwa was too far spent to escape by flight. Within a few minutes the powerful twists and thrusts of his enemy's neck would throw him sideways to be gored to death by the merciless raking stabs of the usurper's horns.

Those horns, slashing and ripping Awi Agwa's flanks, would spoil the giant elk's hide—an elk hide which, because of its astonishing size, would help buy Nunda's stallion. Almayne realized that he could risk no further delay. Again he raised his rifle slowly to draw another bead. Again his sights were lined on the spot above Awi Agwa's heart.

The spot moved as Awi Agwa gave backward. Almayne no longer had a stationary target. Awi Agwa, head to head with his foe, was retreating more rapidly, moving steadily backward, keeping his opponent's antlers within the guard of his own, but no longer trying to hold his ground. The hunter shifted the rifle to readjust his aim, but now the giant elk had swung a little to the right and no vital spot was exposed.

Almayne, still holding the rifle at his shoulder, awaited his opportunity; and suddenly, as he waited, he understood.

Awi Agwa was beaten—beaten for the first time in his life—beaten because he had entered this battle crippled and weary, a mere shadow of himself. But his was not to be the ignominious fate of the defeated monarch. He would not die under the horns and hoofs of his conqueror, trampled to nothingness in the dust.

Perhaps, as Almayne believed, he made his choice deliberately. Perhaps he was too dazed and spent to know what he was doing. At any rate, he no longer circled the meadow as he gave ground before his enemy. Instead, he backed straight towards the precipice's rim.

Almayne leaped to his feet, flung the rifle again to his shoulder. There was no time now for a deliberate aim. Head to head, the two battling

bulls moved towards the brink of the cliff, the usurper pushing his antagonist before him. Another minute and Awi Agwa would plunge backward over that brink to fall five hundred feet upon the jagged rocks below.

A golden eagle, circling above Sani'gilagi's summit, dodged in the air as the dull boom of the rifle came to him.

Almayne stood erect, a tall yellow-brown figure in his stained buckskins, the lowered rifle balanced in his left hand. Fifteen feet from the rim of the precipice lay the usurper's body. Almayne's bullet, ranging forward under the ribs, had pierced the animal's heart. Just beyond the carcass of his fallen rival, his back to the cliff's edge, stood Awi Agwa.

Legs wide apart, his huge bulk swaying from side to side, his head hanging low as though he no longer had strength to support his mighty antlers, the giant elk gazed dully at the hunter. If his ears had heard the rifle shot, it meant nothing to him in that moment of immeasurable weariness. He knew only that suddenly his enemy had fallen at his feet, that in the instant of disaster victory had come.

Presently he lurched forward and thrust weakly with his sharp brow prongs at the body of his foe. Then, with something of his old pride, he lifted his head again. His throat swelled with the bugle call

of triumph; but so faint was the sound that Almayne could scarcely hear it.

Once more Awi Agwa thrust at his dead enemy. Then suddenly he seemed to become aware of the hunter standing in full view not thirty yards away. The giant bull turned and walked slowly across the meadow towards the woods beyond. He did not see Almayne raise his right hand above his head in the stately Cherokee gesture of farewell.

Eyes

EYES

GEARS ago the lumbermen had spread their blight over Tiger Swamp. That blight would be long in passing. Not for centuries, if ever again, would the swamp be what it was before the axmen's coming. The towering straight-trunked cypresses were gone; gone, too, were the mighty pines which once grew all along the swamp's edges, pines which soared seventy feet without a limb. But the place was green again, the scars that had disfigured it were no longer visible. In fact, it was greener than it had ever been in its prime, for now that the great trees which had shaded it were no more, undergrowths of a dozen different kinds could find the sunlight which they needed.

Out of these undergrowths which had come into being since the murder of the trees, out of thickets of myrtle and bay and tangles of blackberry and Cherokee rose, wild nature laughed at the mastery of Man. He had despoiled her, had he? He had slaughtered her noblest trees and swept away the virgin forest which she had created through. long

ages in this place? Yes, he had done these things. But in doing them he had merely made Tiger Swamp a suitable habitation for her, a place of abundant coverts and green, impenetrable refuges where the wildest of her wild creatures could find sanctuary.

And not sanctuary only. The swamp was a fortress as well as a retreat. From its edges hostile invisible eyes looked out at hunters who came to the swamp's margins in search of game; and from its recesses, under cover of night, those of its inhabitants who knew how to wage war in the secret, furtive way of the wild killers launched raids and forays against the neighboring farms.

On a low pine stump near the western edge of Tiger Swamp sat a tall, dun shape, a shape as motionless as the stump of which it might have been a part. It had been there for more than half an hour; it had seen and heard many things; but as yet it had neither seen nor heard the two things which would have interested it most.

It did not know that two pairs of eyes were fixed upon it, that one of those pairs of eyes had never wavered in their gaze since the moment when they had seen this tall, dun shape steal cautiously through the sparse grove of second-growth oaks and sweet gums which bordered the swamp at this point

and take its seat on a certain low pine stump fifty yards from the swamp's margin.

Sandy Jim Mayfield believed in luck. Above all, he believed in the luck of lucky places. Sitting on this stump, he had killed the greatest gobbler that had ever fallen to his gun. Sitting on this stump, he had shot down not his biggest buck but the buck whose antlers were the finest of the sixty pairs of deer horns bristling on the walls of his cabin. Spring hunting—and it was now mid-April—called for as little expenditure of energy as possible. Sandy Jim, lazy with the languor of spring, had left his dogs at home and had walked across a mile of lonely pineland straight to the old pine stump near the swamp's edge.

There the old woodsman would sit till dusk, if necessary, his loaded double-barreled gun resting across his knees, his white head dropped forward a little between his square, high shoulders. If a deer or a turkey came to him there, its doom would be sealed. Being a believer in luck and more particularly in the luck of this spot, and knowing deer and turkeys as he did, Sandy Jim thought it more than likely that some time during the long afternoon a deer or a turkey would come.

He waited, therefore, patiently and hopefully, basking in the warm April sunshine, hearing and yet not hearing the songs of the nesting birds,

drowsy yet alert, indifferent yet eager, listening and watching silently, never suspecting that he himself was watched.

Of the two pairs of unseen eyes that were fixed upon him, one pair, gazing out from the edge of a small myrtle thicket between the hunter and the fringe of short canes along the swamp's margin, never strayed from the motionless dull-brown shape which had taken its station on the pine stump. To the owner of those eyes that dun figure had become, from the moment of its appearance on the scene, the most important and the most hated thing in the visible world.

Until that figure had appeared, the watchful eyes in the myrtle thicket had seen and taken note of many things—towhee buntings and brown thrashers scratching amid the fallen leaves, a gray squirrel moving about the branches of a sweet gum, a big red-crested logcock hammering on a dead pine sapling a little way up the slope. But now all these were forgotten. The eyes in the myrtle thicket no longer saw them. They saw only the form of the hunter, motionless, silent, as inconspicuous in its brown corduroys as the stump itself; and they saw him with fear and hatred, with hatred which was perhaps even more potent than their fear. If the eyes in the myrtle thicket had possessed the dread power which the ancients attributed to that

fabled beast, the basilisk, Mayfield would have died speedily on his stump, the life burnt out of him by the intensity of their gaze.

The other pair of watching eyes, concealed in a clump of broom grass about fifteen feet from the myrtle thicket, were not less alert, not less observant, not less hostile. But they were not so intense, not so fixed and steady. There crept into them now and then an expression which might have denoted both impatience and expectancy. Unlike the eyes in the myrtle thicket, their gaze was not immovably fastened upon the hunter. From time to time they seemed to forget him momentarily, and at such times they searched eagerly all the open spaces of the wood within range of their vision.

Evidently, to the owner of these eyes, the dun form which had suddenly appeared on the pine stump was not the only thing that mattered. There were other things, other possibilities to be remembered and to be watched for. The owner of these eyes, one might have guessed, though keenly interested in watching and studying the strange still shape on the pine stump, was at the same time awaiting with growing impatience some tremendously important event which was due to happen soon.

If Mayfield had suddenly divined the nature of that expected event, if he had become aware

through some mysterious sixth sense, of the hidden hostile eyes regarding him from the myrtle thicket in front of him and from the broom grass clump in front and a little to his left, he would not have betrayed his knowledge by any hasty movement.

Probably his own small, gray-blue eyes, which were now rather dull and heavy because he was drowsy, would have brightened suddenly. Probably his brown, leathery, hawk-like face beneath its thatch of white hair would have become even more hawk-like, because in moments of excitement the old hunter had a trick of contracting his nostrils in a way which made his thin, hooked nose look more than ever like a falcon's beak. But he would not have been startled into any sudden motion; he would not have altered in the slightest degree the waiting game that he was playing. He would have figured the chances with lightning-like rapidity, for in problems of this sort his mind was marvelously quick; and he would have decided accurately that his best chance lay in remaining precisely where he was and in doing exactly what he was doing—namely, nothing.

But no mysterious knowledge of those two pairs of watching, inimical eyes came to Sandy Jim as he drowsed in the April sunlight; and no sixth sense warned him when to the eyes already watching

from concealment there was added yet another pair of hostile orbs.

The eyes that watched from the myrtle thicket and from the broom grass were in front of him, between his pine stump and the swamp. This third pair of eyes which had now come to play a part in the drama watched him from behind.

From the high land to the swamp-edge the ground sloped gently, and Mayfield's stump was about half way down the slope. On the slope itself the trees were mostly second-growth, but just at the crest of the rise, some forty yards from the pine stump, stood an enormous black oak behind whose huge trunk even the mightiest of wild beasts or the burliest of human killers might have lurked unseen. It was from the ambush of this gigantic black oak trunk that this third pair of eyes now studied Mayfield's motionless form as the old hunter sat waiting, with that long patience which the forest teaches, for the deer or the turkey whose coming he expected.

The eyes that watched from behind the black oak trunk were less intense, perhaps, than those that watched from the myrtle thicket. But they were far more formidable. There was no fear in them. Instead they were aglitter with triumph more menacing and more sinister than hatred. They were like the eyes of one, whether beast or man, who sees

his enemy at last in his power—like the eyes of an avenger to whom has come, after long waiting, the yearned for opportunity to strike his foeman down.

These eyes that lurked in the ambush of the black oak trunk were larger than the eyes that watched from the myrtle thicket, smaller than the eyes that watched from the clump of broom grass; and despite the glitter of triumph in them, they were as cold and gray as polished stone. They were eyes that could wait—that could wait and watch with inexhaustible patience until their moment had come.

They would never grow weary, these eyes. Fate or chance had set an ambushade in the woods, and one whom these eyes hated had entered that ambushade. Soon or late the trap would be sprung. Hours might pass before the dun figure on the pine stump made the fatal move to which the eyes of stone looked forward with grim, avid expectation. But hour after hour they would await the coming of that moment. Hour after hour they would watch from their ambush, confident of triumph at the last, sure of the revenge which they desired.

The slow minutes dragged their length along. To Sandy Jim Mayfield came no premonition of peril, no subtle hint of impending tragedy. He was not the kind to whom mysterious warnings come, conveyed by influences or forces beyond human com-

prehension. He had only his physical senses to rely upon, and these gave him no warning. For all his seventy years, his vision was keener than that of most young men, his hearing as acute as it had ever been. But the keenest eyes cannot see that which is invisible; the sharpest ears cannot detect a presence which makes no sound.

No sound came from the myrtle thicket, from the tall broom grass waving gently in the light breeze, from the great black oak trunk at the crest of the slope. Even the smaller folk of the woods seemed unaware of hidden presences in two of these three hiding places. A wren perched on a twig of the myrtle not six inches from the ground and sang for a quarter of an hour with scarcely a pause for breath. A cottontail came out of the swamp and nibbled contentedly at certain appetizing weed stems at the very verge of the broom grass clump. But no bird or little beast ventured close to the black oak trunk forty yards behind the stump where Mayfield sat; and a big iron-gray fox squirrel, which had been exploring the branches of the oak, now lay flattened against an upper limb, staring glassily downward, afraid to move, almost afraid to breathe.

An hour passed. It was now mid-afternoon. The dun figure on the pine stump still held almost exactly the same pose, except that the white head

under the battered brown felt hat no longer sagged forward sleepily. But if Mayfield's drowsiness had disappeared, there was no hint of restlessness or impatience in his attitude. As the afternoon waned the prospect of a turkey would grow less, but the prospect of a deer would improve. Most of the turkey hens were now setting, and the gobblers would seek their roosts well before sunset. But in spring, when the law forbade deer hunting, the whitetail bucks and does soon learned that they need not wait till nightfall to begin feeding. As the shadows lengthened, old Sandy Jim would watch the swamp-edge in front of him with growing expectancy in the hope that out of the fringe of short, dense canes a buck or a doe would come to face his gun—a gun to which the law meant nothing.

Of the three pairs of hostile eyes watching the dun figure of the hunter, two seemed as insensible as Mayfield himself to the passage of time. The eyes in the myrtle thicket had, perhaps, lost something of their intensity, but they never wavered in their fixed, inscrutable stare. The eyes behind the black oak trunk—those eyes which had the hardness and the eternal quality of stone—still glittered with that grim confidence, that ominous assurance of triumph which had shone in them from the beginning. But the eyes in the clump of broom grass

—the large eyes which all the while had seemed to be awaiting some eagerly desired event—appeared to have lost interest in the motionless figure on the pine stump.

Only occasionally did these eyes return to the hunter's form. In general their gaze roved restlessly here and there, as though searching for something as yet invisible; and more evident than ever now was that look of eagerness, of anxious expectancy, of hungry, desperate yearning for some happening long overdue.

Mayfield, had he now discovered the eyes in the broom grass clump, would not have failed to read their message correctly. He would have known precisely what it was that the owner of those eyes expected; and his own eyes, deep-set, almost hidden under white overhanging brows, would have become on the instant even more alert, even more watchful. Perhaps, reading that warning, he would have moved his right hand very slowly and cocked the right barrel of his old-fashioned hammer gun.

But the eyes in the broom grass clump remained invisible to the hunter; their warning message was not read; the gun rested across Mayfield's knees uncocked, its hammers down. Mayfield could not know that presently there would come a moment

when his failure to cock that gun would be regretted bitterly.

Before that moment came, however, there were developments in the drama of which old Sandy Jim, unknown to himself, had become the center—this silent drama of the unseen eyes.

The first of these developments had no apparent starting point, no visible or audible cause. To Sandy Jim's ears no sound had come except the ordinary sounds of the woods—the songs and call notes of small birds, the screaming of a soaring red-shouldered hawk, the cat-like complaining cries of a red-bellied woodpecker somewhere in the swamp. Hence it was not sound which had warned him, if indeed he had received any specific warning. Nor could it have been sight; for while the myrtle thicket and the broom grass clump were in front of him and in plain view, the black oak trunk was directly behind him up the slope and he had never once glanced in that direction.

Nevertheless, the thing which he now did was not purposeless, not accidental. For just before he did it, a change had come over his face, a change so slight as to be scarcely noticeable, yet definite and undoubtedly significant.

Gradually the thin nostrils above the sparse white mustache had contracted and tightened in that odd way which they had in moments of stress,

accentuating the hawk-like look of the lean, sun-tanned face; and at the same time a sudden light had flared momentarily in the gray-blue eyes. Then, very slowly, Sandy Jim turned his head.

Very, very slowly he turned it, inch by inch, so that the movement was barely perceptible, at the same time shifting his body slightly: and so—gradually and to all appearances very casually—his gaze described a half-circle, taking in the thinly wooded spaces to the right of him and behind.

At last his eyes rested on the trunk of the great black oak at the crest of the rise. Four feet of solid living oak stood between him and the grim watcher in that ambush; Mayfield's vision could not pierce the opaque wood and see that which lurked behind it. He saw nothing but the tree itself. Yet he looked no farther. As though he had completed his survey of the space behind him and was no longer interested, his eyes traveled somewhat more quickly back across the arc of a half-circle and resumed their placid, patient scrutiny of the canes at the edge of the swamp from which he hoped a deer would presently emerge.

He had seen nothing, heard nothing. Yet, studying his deep-set eyes and hawk-like face, one would have guessed that something had been learned—something which stirred Sandy Jim Mayfield with a strange excitement.

This, then, was one development in the drama of the unseen eyes. Somehow, though neither sight nor sound had warned him, Mayfield's attention had been drawn to the huge trunk of the black oak on the brow of the slope behind him. As though fate had decided that events should now move swiftly to a crisis, there took place a few minutes afterwards another development in that drama.

To the three pairs of eyes which were watching Sandy Jim where he sat on his pine stump near the margin of the swamp, a fourth pair was added. These eyes were in the swamp itself, or rather just at its edge—in the fringe of short, close-growing canes at which the hunter was gazing. Yet, so dense were the canes, that Mayfield, although he was looking almost directly at the spot, could not see these eyes or the shape to which they belonged.

That shape remained for many minutes absolutely motionless in the cover of the canes while the eyes glared fixedly at the dun figure on the pine stump. They were eyes at once beautiful and terrible but far more terrible than beautiful. They were even more intense than the eyes in the myrtle thicket, even more ruthless than the eyes behind the black oak trunk. They were large, luminous, marvelously bright. Fire burned in them, yellow fire in which green lights glinted. Yet brilliant and piercing as they were, they seemed somehow pale and

cold, and they were incalculably cruel. They were eyes that could know no pity, eyes harder than stone or steel, eyes utterly savage, utterly implacable.

For nearly a quarter of an hour they remained fixed upon the form on the pine stump. Mayfield made not the slightest move. He was as still as though the deadly-cold glare of those unseen, unsuspected orbs in the canes had turned his blood to ice. As a matter of fact, he was thinking hard, thinking not about the implacable eyes in the canes—for he was unaware of their existence—but about the thing which lurked in the ambush of the black oak trunk up the slope behind him.

Some men grow restless when their brains work at utmost speed. Mayfield was of another type. In him intense mental concentration was often accompanied by complete physical repose. If throughout his long vigil he had demonstrated his woodsman's faculty of sitting still in one spot, his stillness was now so perfect that he seemed to have become inanimate.

It was this that hastened the crisis. So inanimate did he seem that to one of the four watching him from ambush he became inanimate. The watcher in the myrtle thicket and the watcher in the broom grass had witnessed his coming and therefore were not to be deceived by his present immobility; the stony-eyed watcher behind the

black oak trunk could not be deceived. But the watcher in the canes, having just come there from the inner regions of the swamp, had not seen the hunter take his seat on the pine stump; and when after many minutes this watcher had detected not the slightest movement, he concluded that the odd-looking, erect, dun-colored object yonder was a projecting portion of the stump itself.

At last, therefore, the cruel eyes in the canes shifted their gaze. The shape of which they were a part moved silently, sinuously forward. Next moment the canes parted and this shape came out into the open.

Sandy Jim Mayfield saw it instantly. He saw instantly, also, that this shape, this monstrous bay lynx, one of the largest that he had ever seen, had come out of the canes for a very definite purpose. He knew that the lynx's powers of scent are limited, but the whole attitude and behavior of this lynx showed him that it had scented something. His perception of this fact was so instantaneous that he checked by a conscious effort of his will the slight start of surprise which the sudden appearance of the creature had occasioned.

The lynx was advancing almost directly towards him, gliding forward very slowly, its padded feet making no sound, its great bearded face hanging low. For an instant Mayfield considered the pos-

sibility that the animal was deliberately advancing upon him. Almost at once, however, he decided that the thing which the tawny killer had scented was between the lynx and himself, that his own scent had not reached the animal's nostrils. His curiosity immediately aroused, he decided to make no move for the present but to await developments.

For the moment he seemed to forget that which watched from the black oak trunk behind him. For the moment his whole attention was concentrated upon the advancing lynx; and it was in this moment that he invoked silent imprecations upon his own head because his gun lay uncocked across his knees, while his hands rested on the stump beside him. He was in plain view of the lynx, but it was evident that his stillness had deceived the animal—as stillness will deceive most wild animals—and that it did not recognize him as a man. It was certain also that even the slight movement necessary to draw back the hammer of the gun would betray him.

Slowly, stealthily the lynx came on. Sandy Jim knew now that the thing which it had scented, the thing which it was stalking, must be hidden at the edge of the myrtle thicket in front of him. He wondered what this thing was, this creature which had lurked so long and so silently under the edge of the myrtles, for he knew that it must have been

there throughout his vigil on the pine stump. Among the guesses which he made was one which was correct. But he did not learn this until afterwards; for when it had come within ten feet of the myrtle thicket, the lynx stopped.

Mayfield watched it curiously. He judged that it had heard what he himself had heard—a sound in the swamp beyond the canes, a faint sound but one which set his pulses beating faster. He knew, or thought that he knew, what that sound was; but the lynx was not so sure. It waited motionless, ears flattened, lips drawn back in a snarl, revealing long, thin, white fangs, its round, bearded face turned a little to the right, so that its pale eyes were no longer directed towards the hunter.

For half a minute it stood thus; and in that half-minute Mayfield's lean, long-fingered right hand moved slowly, cautiously and drew back both hammers of his gun.

Sandy Jim's eyes watched the crouching lynx, but his ears were strained to catch again that faint sound which both he and the lynx had heard. In a moment he heard it again, and this time there was no mistaking it.

Other ears heard it also; and the eyes in the broom grass clump—the large, restless eyes which all along had seemed to be waiting for some desired overdue event—brightened suddenly. But Sandy

Jim, unaware of the presence of those eyes, knew only that success was about to crown his vigil. A deer was coming out of the swamp, the game for which he had been waiting all the long afternoon.

Slowly he raised his gun until the butt rested against his shoulder. Next moment a whitetail doe stepped into view out of the fringe of canes.

Mayfield drew a careful bead as she came on. His long, brown finger was crooked about the trigger. His thin, keen face, pressed against the gunstock, was the face of a hunting hawk. She was within easy range. He could not miss. But moment followed moment and he did not shoot.

Even as he aimed, even as his finger touched the trigger, his face had gone pale beneath its tan. Suddenly, in the nick of time, his thoughts had leaped back to the black oak trunk on the slope behind him and to that which waited and watched in ambush there.

Squinting along the gun barrel he cursed silently, cursing his own folly with something resembling dismay. For a moment he was shaken. The trap had all but closed upon him. He had been very near to the disaster which he dreaded most.

Very slowly he lowered his gun barrel slightly and sat watching. So gradual was the movement that the doe did not see it, while the head of the

crouching lynx was still turned the other way, facing the newcomer. So for a half-minute he waited; and behind the black oak the stern eyes which had been watching there still watched, ablaze now with fierce expectancy, sure that within another fraction of time the trap would be sprung.

Suddenly Mayfield's eyes widened. The doe had given a mighty leap forward. She was flying up the slope now in long bounds, heading straight towards him and straight towards the lynx fifty feet in front of him. Amazed, Mayfield watched her. She must have scented the lynx by now, yet she came straight on. Sandy Jim saw the light in her eyes, the bristling hair on her neck, and in a flash the truth came to him. This doe was a mother racing to the rescue of her fawn.

The lynx crouched midway between the myrtle thicket and the broom grass clump. The doe's last long forward bound carried her to the edge of the broom grass, and for a tenth of a second she paused to nuzzle something that lay hidden there. Then, stiff-legged, her head high, her neck arched, she bounded sideways towards the lynx.

Once Sandy Jim Mayfield had seen a whitetail buck cut a rattlesnake to pieces in the woods. He knew the deadly swiftness of the rattler's stroke, the incredible quickness with which that spear-shaped head could deliver its lethal thrust. But

he had learned on that occasion that the rattler's quickness is as nothing compared with the quickness of the whitetail deer and that even the poisoned fangs of the king of serpents cannot avail against the whitetail's flint-edged hoofs.

That had been a great fight. This was to be a longer and a more spectacular one. Again, in his absorption in this lesser drama, Mayfield seemed to forget the drama of which he himself was the center, to forget the ruthless eyes watching from the ambush of the black oak trunk behind him. He sat in plain view on the pine stump, but the combatants were so intent upon their battle that neither saw him. Almost before he knew it the doe leaped to the attack. But all the big cats are marvelously quick, and the bay lynx is quick as light. When the doe's sharp hoofs came down the lynx was not there.

So swiftly that Mayfield's eyes could not follow the motion, the lithe, tawny cat had leaped three feet to the right. Another short leap would have carried him into the myrtle thicket, but, instead, he bounded back into the open. Probably he had not grasped the significance of what was happening. Occasionally some big buck had displayed a certain arrogance towards him, but in general he had found the deer, especially the does, a timid folk. He did not know that a fawn lay hidden in the clump of

broom grass; and he had never before fallen foul of a doe defending her young.

In a moment he had cause to regret his rashness. Stiff-legged, prancing daintily like a dancer, the doe circled him while he crouched, snarling, showing all his pointed white teeth, his bristling back bent like a bow, one keen-clawed forepaw lifted, ready to strike. The doe was trying to get behind him, but he turned as she turned, and presently she tired of the delay.

He knew when the blow was coming, but he did not know exactly where. This time the doe seemed to guess the direction in which he would leap to avoid that blow. Suddenly she bounded high, her long slim legs straightened beneath her; and this time, as the lynx leaped from under her, he leaped almost into the path of those descending hoofs and one of them ripped a long gash in his hind-quarter.

Snarling with pain and rage, he whirled in the air, his long body bending as though made of rubber. More swiftly than a boxer's fist, his big right paw, bristling with curved retractile claws, swished downward and across, raking the skin from the doe's slim foreleg. It was a powerful blow, and the doe, thrown off her balance, nearly lost her footing. But the wound which the lynx had dealt was slight compared with the one which he had received. His

right hindquarter was streaming blood and the pain of it burnt like fire.

That pain took the heart out of him. The doe was circling him again, dancing around him in that odd, mincing, stiff-legged way, head high, ears flattened, tail erect. He saw her muscles tighten, knew that another attack was coming. With one last savage snarl, he sprang six feet to the left and vanished in the myrtle thicket.

Immediately the doe turned, walked to the broom grass clump, and stood with lowered head, caressing her fawn. The large eyes that had watched from the broom grass were no longer urgently, anxiously expectant. They were calm and happy now. The event for which they had been waiting had come at last. The absent mother had returned to her little one.

Mayfield could not see the fawn from where he sat, but minutes ago he had learned from the doe's actions that the little creature was there in the broom grass, that it had been lying there unknown to him all the long afternoon awaiting its mother's return from the swamp where she had gone to graze. There was no sentiment in Sandy Jim. He had killed scores of deer, in season and out. He could kill this one without a twinge of conscience.

He raised the gun slowly. Deliberately he

sighted, aiming at a point just behind the doe's shoulder. Longingly, lovingly his finger caressed the trigger. Into the grim eyes watching from the black oak trunk on the slope behind him leaped a light of exultant joy.

A long stalk was over. Sandy Jim Mayfield's fate was about to overtake him at last.

Two minutes later Sandy Jim Mayfield reared his long, lank form from the pine stump where he had sat so long and so patiently. He was not in a pleasant mood. To gaze along his gun barrel at that doe and refrain from pulling the trigger had imposed upon him a terrible strain. He had been rash, perhaps, in exposing himself to it, but there had been a reason. The ordeal had lasted nearly a full minute, and it had been almost more than the old hunter could stand. Again and again he had all but pressed the trigger. He had been thankful when at last the doe, having recovered somewhat from the excitement of her battle with the lynx, scented him and made off unwillingly into the swamp.

Sandy Jim walked to the broom grass clump and found the fawn. He searched the ground under the edges of the myrtle thicket and discovered what it was that the lynx had been stalking—a wild turkey hen sitting on her eggs gazing up at him with in-

tense, unwavering orbs. Then he shouldered his gun and started homeward.

Before him at the top of the rise loomed the massive trunk of the great black oak which had played so singular a part in the afternoon's events. Mayfield knew that the eyes which had watched him from behind that oak still waited there. Yet he walked straight towards the tree, his gun slung carelessly across his shoulder. Only the odd contraction of the thin nostrils above his white mustache revealed his knowledge of a crisis yet to come.

He was abreast of the black oak, even a step or two beyond it, when he stopped short and turned his head quickly.

"Why, hello, Sam Woodfin!" he exclaimed.

The man who stood behind the black oak—a big man, bushy-browed, clad in corduroys and hunting boots, a rifle balanced in his right hand—glared at the hunter sternly out of stony gray eyes. On his shirt under the flap of his coat gleamed a game warden's badge. The blackness of his frown, the bulging veins in his forehead, were mute evidences of his temper. With an effort he spoke calmly.

"Mayfield," he said, "you don't like me and I don't like you, and some day I'm going to get you for killing deer out o' season. But there's one or two things I want to ask you. When did you learn that I was watching you from behind this oak?"

Mayfield seemed to consider.

“'Bout a half-hour befo' that doe come out o' the swamp,” he answered.

“How'd you spot me?”

Sandy Jim appeared to ignore this second question. “Ain't it funny, Sam,” he said in a tone of utmost friendliness, “how fashions change? I was thinkin' about it while I was settin' down yunder by the swamp obsarvin' natur' an' listenin' to the birds a-singin'.”

“What's that got to do with what I'm asking you?” growled the game warden.

“Well, you see, Sam, it's like this. A while ago everybody was smokin' them cigarettes that come in a brown paper—I dun'no what you call 'em, not bein' a smoker myself. Then, by an' by, white cigarettes got to be the fashion, an' now there's only two men in this part o' the county that smokes browns—you an' Pete Mason. Henry Harvey down at the store was tellin' me the other day that he wouldn't never sell any browns ef 'twarn't fer you an' Pete.”

“Well?” snapped the warden.

“Well,” Sandy Jim drawled, “I'm a old hound but I got a pretty good nose. I don't smoke myself, but I kin smell a cigarette 'most a hundred yards ef the wind's right. When I got a whiff of one of the old browns—they got a sweetish tang to

'em that the whites ain't got—I knowed that either you er Pete Mason was a little way up the wind from me; an' Pete ain't in the habit of snoopin' round in the woods."

Warden Sam Woodfin seemed to have lost the power of speech, but Sandy Jim continued earnestly, wagging his white head.

"They's bad things, Sam, them cigarettes. Used to call 'em coffin nails. An' they interfere with business. Ef it hadn't been fer that one you smoked a while ago, you'd have got the proof on old Jim Mayfield who yer been tryin' to ketch fer two years an' more."

Again the old man shook his head mournfully.

"She was a fine doe, Sam," he said, "an' I had her right at the end o' my gun. I shore hated to let her go."

Justice of the Wild

JUSTICE OF THE WILD

A HALF-HOUR before dawn, in the cypress swamp where the wood ibis flock slept, strange, harsh, unearthly sounds broke the silence which hung over the moss-tapestried cypresses around the shores of the lagoon. These sounds came from the trees where the ibises were talking with one another, clacking their bills, extending and retracting their long necks, opening and folding their wings, impatiently awaiting the coming of day. From the woods came the eerie songs of two chuck-will's-widows answering each other across the still dark water, and presently, close at hand, a big swamp owl woke the echoes with his sonorous "Who whoo, whoo-who whoo-who-who-who." Then, when the first faint light had begun to filter down through the moss curtains of the trees, the eleven-foot alligator who was master of this lagoon sent his long, melancholy, tremulous challenge rolling and quavering through the woods, a resonant, menacing call, incredibly strange and wild.

Scarcely had its last note died when old Sanute, chief of the wood ibis army, craned his long neck,

spread his wide wings, and launched forward from his perch in the tallest of the cypresses. With a noisy flapping of great pinions which swayed and rocked the moss-pennants trailing from every branch, the whole ibis host, first in twos and threes, then in tens and twenties, took to the air. Their necks curving downward, their legs dangling, their ample wings laboring mightily, they lifted themselves in narrow circles through the mist—a whirling confusion of great white shapes dimly visible in the pallid light, passing and repassing like phantoms against the gray background of the curtained trees, spiraling upward to clear the cypress-tops.

For some minutes after the last of them had risen above the trees the whole flock swung in ever-widening circles above the forest, mounting steadily towards the higher level where the leader sailed back and forth, peering down with frequent twists and turns of his big, queer-looking head as though studying the maneuvers of his followers. Then, satisfied that the army was ready to begin its aërial march, he turned his long bill southeastward towards the distant sea marshes behind the barrier islands.

Very wise with the wisdom of many summers was Sanute, leader of the wood ibis host—very wise and very old. But it was not with him as with men. He had not paid in physical vigor for the knowledge which the years had brought. Despite

his age, he was as strong as he ever had been, as tireless, as active, as quick of sight and of hearing.

A certain beauty he had even when seen standing at rest, though his long legs and neck, his naked head, and long heavy bill curved towards the tip and much stouter than that of a heron, made him appear a fantastic, even a grotesque, figure, according well with the uncouth and ghostly background of the lagoon where the ibises slept. But it was in the high air and in the full light of the sun that he was at his best. Then—his neck and legs stretched to the utmost, his wide wings, more than six feet from tip to tip, fully extended—he was a splendid and memorable sight as he sailed and circled two hundred feet, five hundred feet, a thousand feet above the marshes, looking down upon his fellows. Always, when soaring thus, Sanute mounted well above all the other birds of the ibis flock, for he was larger than any of the others and stronger of wing and he liked to exhibit his supremacy. And of them all he was not only the largest and strongest but also the handsomest. Time had not dulled his colors but had brightened and intensified them. His yellowish-brown bill was yellower than theirs; his long legs and the sides of his naked head were bluer; his body and wings were of a purer and more brilliant whiteness; his tail and wing-tips, instead

of being dull black, glittered with a metallic green and purple iridescence.

The other ibises of the flock acknowledged without question the leadership which Sanute exercised. It was the due reward of his superior physical powers and of his experience and wisdom. Most of the other ibises were young birds, many of them birds of the year, fully grown but not yet attired in fully adult plumage. In the youngest of them the head and neck were not bare but were covered with short downy feathers and the white plumage showed in places a grayish cast. They were the novices of the flock, the raw recruits of the ibis army, beside whom the two-year- and three-year-old birds who made up the bulk of the host felt themselves veterans. In addition to these youngsters of varying degrees of immaturity and inexperience, the flock included a good many older birds, some of them almost as old as Sanute himself. They had joined the brigade after the breeding season was over and had journeyed under Sanute's leadership to the wide lonely sea marshes of the Low Country coast between the palm-fringed barrier islands and the forested mainland, marshes which for many summers had been the old ibis's favorite feeding ground.

It was towards these marshes that Sanute led his feathered troopers from their sleeping place in the cypress swamp. They flew high above the tree-tops

not only for safety's sake but also to clear the uppermost stratum of the morning mist spread like a blue-gray blanket over the forest, shutting it completely from view. Always old Sanute, jealous of his leadership, held the van, but the rest of the flock maintained no fixed or regular order. Sometimes they swept along over a broad curving front nearly five hundred feet from flank to flank. Again for a space they were strung out in single file or in two long, crooked, converging lines somewhat resembling the wedge-shaped formation of migrating geese; but generally they flew in a loose, rather irregular phalanx, perhaps four times as long as it was wide.

When they had left the denser forest behind them and were approaching the edge of the bay, the mist blanket seemed to slide away from under them and they looked down upon a green smiling country where patches of woodland alternated with cultivated fields. Here Sanute mounted fifty feet higher, and all his followers mounted after him. Thus, when they sighted the little house where Red Cam Reppington the hunter lived alone near the edge of Little Raccoon Swamp, they were well above shotgun range.

Red Cam, up earlier than usual, saw them when they were yet half a mile away. He knew that every morning the ibis army passed over his house en route from their secret sleeping place in the deep

cypress swamps to the salt marshes of the coast where they spent the forenoon feeding; but because the ibises were not game birds he had hitherto taken little interest in them and had never made special note of the precise time of their coming. They were at least half an hour earlier than he had expected, but, as it happened, this mattered little, since he had made his preparations the night before.

With practiced eye he measured the height of the approaching flock, then darted into the house. In a half-minute he was out again, carrying not his shotgun but the high-powered rifle which he had placed, loaded and ready, just inside his door. Careful to keep himself out of sight, he crouched at the corner of the house, awaiting the moment which would offer him the best chance—the moment when the great ibis leading the oncoming host would be almost directly over him.

At best it was a question of luck. To hit his moving target at that height with a single bullet was a feat which even Red Cam, one of the best shots in the Low Country, could not perform unless fortune stood his friend. But Lady Luck, as he was fond of calling her, had often befriended Cam both in the woods and elsewhere, and he risked nothing by again invoking her aid. A wry grin twisted his florid, sullen face as he thought of what a tri-

umph it would be to leave Sanute's severed head on the doorstep of a certain cottage that night as proof that when Cameron Reppington uttered a threat he would swiftly make it good.

Sanute knew nothing of rifles. But he knew as much as a bird can know about shotguns and he was serenely aware that no shotgun roaring at him from Red Cam's yard could possibly hurt him or any of his flock at the height at which they were traveling. Nevertheless, when his quick eye caught a spurt of flame and a tiny puff of white smoke far below him at the corner of Cam's house, the big bird seemed to rear and stagger in the air. Yet he did not fall. Instead, he evidently rose; for in an instant he was hidden from Cam's view by the vanguard of the ibis army rushing past beneath him.

Not all of them passed. A young ibis, a bird of the year, which had been flying directly behind Sanute, his bill almost touching the tips of the leader's extended feet, crumpled and dropped like a stone.

Cam growled an oath. Old Sanute had proved his cunning, halting in the air at the flash of the rifle and swerving upward so that even if the bullet had been perfectly aimed it would have passed harmlessly in front of him. Cam cursed himself and Lady Luck impartially. He did not bother to pick up the dead ibis where it plumped to earth beside a clump of yuccas. It was a young bird, he

knew, and he could not substitute its feathered head for the bare head of Sanute, the veteran. Leaving it for his dog Brutus or for the turkey vultures, who would find it soon enough if Brutus scorned it, he turned back indoors to cook his breakfast.

Three miles beyond Cam Reppington's house, on a low bluff overlooking the wide emerald marshes of the bay, stood the small, white, vine-covered cottage where John Marston lived with his blue-eyed, brown-haired granddaughter Ellen. He, too, was astir early but no earlier than was his habit; for the little old man, as all the bay-dwellers called him, loved the fragrance and freshness of the June dawns even better than the crimson glories of the June sunsets, and nearly always he was up and dressed before the sun rose from behind the woods on the distant barrier islands along the edge of the sea.

There was another reason why, when June had come to the Low Country, John Marston seldom lay late abed. June brought the wood ibises to his marshes—tall, fantastic, long-necked and long-legged black and white storks that somehow gave him more pleasure than any others of the marshland birds; and early every morning from June to October an army of wood ibises, headed by an old ibis whom Marston had known for years and to whom

he had given the name of an Indian warrior famous long ago in the Low Country, passed over the cottage bound for their feeding grounds on the salt flats. Marston, a lover of all wild creatures, a born naturalist with something of the poet in him, always found rare delight in watching the feathered army pass, and sometimes he would call excitedly to Ellen, busy indoors preparing breakfast, to come out on the porch and share the wonder of the spectacle.

But this morning the little old man, sitting in his favorite chair on the porch awaiting the ibises' coming, would hardly call his granddaughter. His mind was troubled. His sun-tanned face wore a frown and the vivid blue eyes above his short white beard were strangely cold and hard. He was thinking of Red Cam's oath and of the quarrel that had led to it and of what might come of it.

Cam Reppington, a gentleman born, could play the gentleman when he wanted to; and Ellen, whatever she might have heard, had never seen him drunk. In the old city days, which had ended with the fatal affair of the bank's money, he had been a clever hand with women; and when this girl took his fancy he had not found it hard to lie his way into her good graces so that for a while she had overruled her grandfather's objections to Cam's visits.

At last she had realized the truth and had turned from him in disgust, loathing herself because for a time she had tolerated him. So, when Cam came again, John Marston had shown him the door; and Red Cam, redder than ever with rage, restrained only by Ellen's presence from driving his fist into the old man's face, had sworn to have revenge. At most of his threats Marston smiled because they were too dire to be fulfilled; but there was one that worried him, since it was a threat which Cam might safely carry out if he could compass its execution. It was the recollection of this threat that plagued John Marston as he sat on his porch smoking his long-stemmed pipe, awaiting the coming of the ibis host.

Presently he saw it, at first a mere speck against the sky to the northward, a speck which grew and lengthened and widened. Soon it had the appearance of a wavering black line above the woods; and then as it drew swiftly nearer it became a regiment of great long-necked birds as big as geese sweeping through the air in a wide curved rank like a bent bow two hundred feet above the trees.

With shining eyes Marston watched them as they came on, planing downward as they left the woods behind them and drew nearer the edge of the wide marsh plain. The army was almost directly over him now, one great bird larger and whiter than the

rest leading the way. He could hear the swish of the broad black-edged wings and could almost distinguish the color of the dark-brown eyes in the great elongated heads which, as though weighed down by the long, curved, heavy bills, were carried a little low. Both joy and trouble were in the little old man's face as, tilting back in his chair, he peered up at them as they passed—a splendid sight, indeed, their big white bodies and wings shining like silver in the morning light.

“There they go,” he muttered, “old Sanute in command.”

For a half-minute after the last of them had passed he continued to gaze upward. Slowly the delight which the spectacle of the ibis army never failed to bring him faded from his face as though yielding reluctantly to some insidious, repugnant thought which would not be denied.

“So Cam's going to kill you, is he?” he said aloud—“going to kill you and send me your head? Well, you're a wise old chief, Sanute, and Red Cam will never lift your scalp.”

The boast seemed to dispel his fears. For a moment he smiled. But almost instantly the smile vanished. The vivid blue eyes hardened and narrowed and with a bang he brought down the up-tilted legs of his chair.

“By God!” he exclaimed, striking his clenched

fist into his palm, "I've stood all I'm going to stand! If Red Cam kills *him* I'll kill Cam."

Some five hours later, Sanute the wood ibis, standing in the water at the mouth of a small marsh gully, decided that one more mullet would be enough. His gullet was already crammed full, but he rejoiced in an exceedingly hearty appetite and he could accommodate another fish if it were not too large. The ibis army, breaking up into detachments, had scattered widely over the marshes, and then, dividing into still smaller squads, the ibises had set about getting breakfast. But Sanute fished alone, as always. He wanted no clumsy, bump-tious, more or less inexperienced youngster near him when he waded into the shallows of some sinuous marsh brook and grappled with the important business of satisfying that imperious appetite.

Tide had passed the half-ebb. The water was swirling out of the steep-sided, flat-bottomed gully in which he stood, his shoulders humped, his long neck extended, his big solemn-looking head cocked knowingly on one side. From time to time during the morning he had danced awkwardly about in the shallows, scratching the soft bottom of the gully to stir up the mud; then thrusting his bill into the cloudy water, he had held it there for a while, the scythe-like, sharp-edged mandibles partly open. The

shrimp were not yet as large or as abundant as they would be later in the season, but the water flowing through his mandibles brought a good many little transparent crustaceans into the trap and few of these ever got out.

Now, however, he wanted no more shrimp, but a nice mullet with which to complete his meal; and, besides, the conditions were no longer auspicious for shrimp-fishing. A four-foot shark, whose dorsal and tail fins moved slowly back and forth across the mouth of the gully where it opened into a large marsh creek, had invaded Sanute's fishing ground, and although no shark had ever attacked him, the old ibis preferred to hold his head high so that he could keep an eye on this intruder.

Presently his opportunity came. The heavy curved bill, its mandibles closed, shot down into the water and instantly rose again. It was a lightning-like stroke, powerful enough to stagger a raccoon if it had landed between the eyes, and in a moment a six-inch mullet, insensible or perhaps already dead, swirled to the surface of the little eddy at the edge of which the ibis stood.

Striding forward, he seized the fish, turned it deftly in his bill and swallowed it headforemost. Wading ashore, he took three quick steps over the hard, sun-baked mud between the water and the marsh; then, his long neck curving downward, his

long legs dangling, he lifted himself with swift, strong wing beats into the air.

As he spiraled upward, Sanute surveyed the green salt prairies spread beneath him—the wide sea marshes stretching away northeastward and southwestward as far as his eye could see, bounded on one side by the forest of the distant Low Country mainland and on the other by the semi-tropical woods on the long narrow barrier islands beyond which lay the ocean. Above him, around him and below him he saw other ibises, some of them fishing at the mouths of little gullies opening into the tidal creeks which wound everywhere through the marshes; some sunning themselves in closely bunched flocks on shell mounds or heaps of sedge piled up by the tides; others winging their way lazily, with three or four wing beats, then a long graceful sail, towards the barrier island jungle; still others soaring beautifully on motionless pinions high in the windless upper air under the deep-blue June sky.

He saw also a pair of eagles soaring higher than the highest of the ibises; an osprey poising and hovering over a marsh creek where it opened into a broad shallow sound; scores of herons—great blues, little blues and Louisianas—passing back and forth beneath him with measured wing beats or fishing along the edges of the sinuous waterways; a squadron of brown pelicans floating on the surface of a

wide creek near an inlet; a flock of more than fifty tall, glistening egrets completely covering, as though a shining white blanket were spread over it, the low, dense cassena thicket on a little hummock in the marsh. All these, and the long-winged royal terns and skimmers, the loquacious rails and willets, the handsome black and white red-billed oystercatchers, the graceful least terns, and the busy, restless sandpiper regiments on the curving inlet shore were familiar sights to Sanute and they interested him little. He had fed even more bounteously than usual. The languor of complete satiety was upon him. It was time for his midday siesta.

Some whim turned his bill towards the distant mainland woods instead of the barrier island jungle where he usually took his noon nap. Perhaps it was the sight of the egrets on the hummock far beneath him which put the notion in his head, for the place that he had in mind was a certain cypress-bordered freshwater lagoon where a great egret city was situated. Perhaps Fate had something to do with it—Fate which often, like an all-powerful, relentless genie or wizard of the wilderness, seems to arrange with the most minute care those tragic dramas of the woods which are none the less real because man so seldom witnesses them.

At any rate, when Sanute, after mounting almost as high as the towering eagles, set out for the lonely

lagoon of the egrets some ten miles or more away, the little old man who lived in the white vine-covered cottage by the shore of the bay, was sitting on an oak stump beside that lagoon, feasting his eyes on the beauty of the tall milk-white birds perching in scores and hundreds in the young feathery-foliaged cypresses fringing the egret lake. And at that same moment Red Cam, his shotgun balanced in his right hand, his black mongrel Brutus following at his heels, was making his way through the mixed forest of pine, oak and hickory in the midst of which lay the secluded serpentine backwater where the plumed white birds had their town.

A definite purpose had brought Cam to those woods. An inveterate hunter, he spent most of his time roaming with his gun. Laws and seasons were nothing to him. At all seasons he killed whatever game crossed his path. On this June day he was hopeful that Lady Luck would show him a wild turkey and he was working down through the woods towards the lagoon because a few days before he had seen the sign of a big gobbler in a certain swale near the water's edge. But John Marston had come to the lagoon by mere accident—or so he would have said if he had been asked about it, though it is possible that the woods genie, preparing the drama to be enacted there that day, was responsible for the chance which had turned him aside from his path.

Tramping through the woods on his way to a certain lotus pond where many purple gallinules nested and reared their young, he had seen a large flock of egrets pass over high above the pines, flying eastward. They were bound, he knew, for the egret city, and reflecting that more than a week had passed since he had visited the place and that the young egrets would now be well grown, he had decided to let the gallinules wait for a day and had followed the big white birds.

For an hour he had been sitting on his oak stump beside the southern shore of the lagoon, an ideal post from which to watch the teeming life of the town. As always when he visited the egret metropolis, the wonder of it took possession of him. It was like a scene from another and more fantastic world, and the little old man, though skillful with words, had never been able to describe it.

To his right the tall, smooth, columnar trunks of great cypresses towered above the still water, their branches clothed with a gray spectral witchery of Spanish moss; but in front of him and to his left the cypress woods fell away and he looked out upon an open sunny lake walled in by young, dark-green, full-foliaged trees. In these marginal cypress woods and in small cypress groves and willow clumps rising here and there from the surface of the lake the egrets had their nests, nests which seemed innumer-

able, ten or twelve or even a score of nests to each small tree. And everywhere—on the nests, in the trees and in the air—the great snowy birds, buoyant as air itself, graceful beyond description, adorned with long delicate plumes which drooped beyond their tails, perched and circled and soared.

John Marston sat like one entranced. For ten years or more he had visited the egret city many times each spring and summer; yet its magic never grew stale. His gaze shifted from point to point of the bewildering, ever-changing panorama before him; now resting upon a lone pyramidal cypress near the center of the lake where more than fifty egrets, young birds and adults, crowded together so closely as to hide almost entirely the lustrous foliage of the tree; now lingering upon a dead cypress-top across the lagoon where four big black snakebirds or anhingas, grotesque reminders of the incredible bird-reptiles of the incredible past, stood with their long sombre wings half-opened to the sun while all around them in the air white egrets and smaller blue herons, which shared the egret city, sailed and swerved—a kaleidoscopic aërial whirlpool of color and life.

Often the little old man's eyes, as though fascinated by the sight, returned to a spot near the middle of the lagoon where three great alligators

lay between two lily-pad islands, their huge shapeless heads and jagged black backs showing above the surface. Even more potently than the snake-birds these long armored dragons of the waters carried his mind back to the fantastic Ancient World—back and back, across ages and æons, to that remote and seemingly fabulous time when the giant reptiles of the dinosaur dynasty ruled the earth. For this reason, despite their hideousness, he found delight in the big saurians also; and because those rugged, plated, sinister heads protruding from the dark water were an essential part of the outlandish magic of the lagoon, he looked for them always when he came to the egret town.

He was watching the motionless, seemingly lifeless 'gators when above them and farther to the left he saw Sanute the wood ibis sail into view over the tree-tops and come to rest on a dead cypress standing well out of the water. Marston recognized the big bird at once. He had known Sanute too well and too long to make any mistake; and he wondered what obscure chance had caused the ibis chief to return to the mainland for his midday siesta instead of resorting as usual to the barrier island woods. He watched the big bird dispose himself comfortably on a limb of the dead cypress, unmindful of the transitory excitement of the egrets and herons who had their homes nearby; then Mar-

ston's gaze wandered off to settle once more upon the three big reptilian masters of the lagoon.

He did not know that other eyes as keen and almost as practiced as his own had seen the ibis alight and had recognized the bird with equal certainty. Red Cam had been slowly making his way down through the woods on the opposite side of the lagoon. He had seen no sign of the gobbler for which he was looking and presently he sat down to rest at the foot of a big sycamore a few yards from the edge of the water.

Munching a chunk of bread, washed down with copious draughts from his flask, he talked to the black mongrel Brutus, as was his habit, grumbling about his luck, which seemed to have deserted him. Again and again, as the liquor worked on him, his thoughts returned to Ellen and her grandfather; and these too he cursed, vehemently, obscenely, laying his grievance before the dog as though the animal understood his words.

A swift shadow slid past him and in the midst of a tirade Cam glanced up quickly. It was not a turkey, as he had hoped, but a wood ibis, and, craning his neck to see beyond the willows fringing the lagoon, he watched the big bird alight on a dead limb far out over the water. A grin overspread his flushed face as he gazed. He rose hastily, reached for his gun, and, bidding Brutus

follow close at heel, slunk away amid the tree trunks.

Red Cam moved swiftly with lynx-like liveness. The liquor which heated his brain and loosened his tongue while he rested under the sycamore seemed not to impair in the slightest his accustomed skill in all the arts of the woods. He knew well the wariness of the old ibis and he knew that his only chance of getting within range lay in crawling almost to the end of a low, narrow, reed-grown tongue of land, lined with willows and studded with up-standing cypress knees, extending well out into the lagoon. This would be no easy task, yet Cam felt that his luck had turned. Weeks or months might pass before he had another opportunity as good as this one to carry out the threat which was to be part of his revenge on the man he hated.

Sanute stood on his cypress limb, languid, motionless, seemingly asleep. His long neck was drawn in between his hunched shoulders, his heavy bill rested on his chest. He looked a picture of lazy, drowsy contentment. Often his eyes remained closed for minutes at a time; yet, though he seemed to doze, he was aware, by sight or sound, of nearly every unusual incident in the life of the lagoon around him.

Sometimes circling egrets passed so near him as almost to touch him with their snowy wings. A

combative anhinga lit on the end of the cypress limb, stabbed at him with straight, sharp, javelin-like beak, and departed only when the ibis's neck suddenly lengthened and his stout bill lunged viciously at the intruder. Through lids that seemed to be tightly closed he saw a copper-backed red-bellied snake draw its glittering length out of the water and glide silently along a half-submerged log sixty feet below him; and once, when he appeared to be sunk in slumber, he caught the faint sucking noise made by a prowling raccoon as it drew its foot out of the soft clinging mud on the margin of the lagoon. But no sound came to him from the narrow willow-covered peninsula where Red Cam crawled slowly and laboriously through the muck, drawing nearer and nearer inch by inch, black Brutus crawling at his heels; and except when the light breeze stirred them, not a reed or a willow branch moved.

A half-hour passed. . . . A thunderous crashing roar shook the air of the egret city. Up from the trees on every side rose the startled egrets and herons in white and blue-gray clouds, croaking loud cries of alarm; and down from his perch on the cypress limb pitched Sanute the ibis, one great wing beating frantically—straight down into the waters of the lagoon close to the foot of the dead cypress.

John Marston, now standing tiptoe on his stump some seventy yards away on the other shore, saw

Red Cam's burly, brown-shirted figure rise among the willows on the tongue of land near the tree in which the ibis had been perching and heard his hoarse shout of triumph.

The little old man's sun-tanned face flamed with the fury that possessed him. His blue eyes narrowed and glittered like sword-points; his breath came short and fast.

Yet instantly he realized his helplessness. There was nothing that he could do. He had no weapon and Cam had his shotgun. Later, he said to himself through clamped teeth, there would be a reckoning. For the present he stood still on his oak stump and watched. Unseen himself, he could see all that happened; and he saw that the ibis had not been killed but was swimming towards a little island in the lagoon formed by the reed-covered carcass of an ancient cypress which had fallen many years before.

Red Cam, thrusting the willow branches aside, peered out over the water to find his victim. He knew by the manner of the big bird's fall that its wing had been broken, and if this was the ibis's only injury the bird might yet escape him. Without stopping to replace the spent cartridge, he leveled his gun for a shot with the other barrel. But when he tried to draw his bead the swimming bird shimmered and danced before his eyes.

Cam swore, swaying on his feet as he strove to

steady the gun. The liquor had him at last, taking possession of him suddenly as it so often did—laying hold of him all at once when the mental tension which had held his nerves taut was abruptly ended by the successful shot which had brought the ibis down.

Yet he must shoot and shoot quickly, for the crippled bird had nearly reached the reedy island of the cypress log. It was only when Cam tried to draw a fine sight along his gun barrel that his target jiggled so madly before him in a dull red mist. Wide-eyed, his vision was fairly steady, fairly clear. Throwing the gun to his shoulder, he pulled trigger the moment the wavering muzzle covered the bird.

To the right of the ibis and behind him the water seethed and foamed where the scattering turkey shot peppered it. Sanute swam on. In another quarter-minute he had gained the half-submerged log and had clambered up its sloping side. There he stood, his bill gaping, his left wing drooping, his tall, bulky, white body overtopping the tallest of the reeds.

Red Cam, gripping a willow branch to hold himself steady, fumbled at his waist with the other hand. He could no longer trust his eye to measure distance accurately, but he believed that the ibis was still within long range. He would reload and shoot again and continue shooting until he hit the

mark. But the hand that fumbled for the cartridge belt fumbled in vain; and Cam cursed again as he remembered that when he had sat down to rest under the sycamore he had removed the belt because it chafed his side.

It would take ten minutes or more to get the belt and return, but there was nothing else to be done. Turning, he stumbled over Brutus, the lanky black mongrel, sitting just behind him, as always eagerly awaiting his commands. An idea flashed into Cam's muddled brain. Stooping, he spoke to the dog, patting the animal's sleek head and pointing out over the lagoon.

Black Brutus knew instantly what was expected of him. And instantly he obeyed. The love that he bore this surly master of his was a strange thing, and not less strange was the boundless faith which now sent him unfaltering into waters where he would never have ventured of his own accord. A Low Country dog, whelped and reared in the Low Country and all his life a rover of the Low Country woods, he knew the dangers which lurked for him and all his race in the dark wine-colored waters of the cypress lagoons. But his master had spoken—the master who was his only friend—who sometimes beat and kicked him but who had never failed him in the woods; and he knew, as he plunged in and started swimming towards the log where the ibis

stood, that this all-powerful master would watch over him from the bank and would hurl swift leaden death at any foe that attacked him on the way.

Marston, watching from his oak stump, saw it all and found in it confirmation of his suspicion that Cam was drunk. He glanced quickly towards the spot where, until that first shot rang out, the three great saurians had been basking at the surface of the water. Two of them had vanished altogether; but close to the place where they had been lying he saw two dark knobs, which might have been the blunt ends of waterlogged sticks, projecting an inch or so above the water and in front of them another knob. Presently all three of these knobs began to move, slowly at first, then, faster, yet hardly fast enough to disturb the placid surface of the lagoon.

Red Cam could not see them from where he stood, for the 'gator was behind and beyond the point of the willow-bordered peninsula, moving in a direction which would enable him to cut off the dog's retreat. And for some minutes black Brutus did not see them because they were approaching him from the flank and his eyes were fixed upon his goal. Then, at last, when he had covered nearly two-thirds of the distance to the cypress log where the wounded ibis stood, the dog, swerving aside to

avoid a clump of lily-pads, awoke to his danger.

Panic, born of instinct inherited from a long line of woods-ranging forbears, swept over him like a wave. Had he held his straight course, he might have gained the little island of the cypress log, but his one thought was to get back to his master. The little old man heard his mad yelps of terror and saw him turn and strike out for the willow dyke. A gallant fight black Brutus made, swimming as he had never swum before, his small jet head jerking convulsively as he cried out to the master who had never failed him yet.

But from the beginning the odds were heavily against him. Those periscope eyes with the larger protruding nostril-knob in front were now sliding through the water at a rate exceeding the speed of the dog; and whereas black Brutus was swimming around the arc of a wide half-circle, the 'gator was cutting straight across in a course which would intersect the arc and which was bringing him each moment yards nearer to his prey. And the dog could not maintain the heart-breaking pace which he had set. Always the 'gator's speed was increasing while the dog's was diminishing. In his frenzy of terror black Brutus's strength seemed to have gone out of him—or else he was spending his strength with his breath in those shrill pitiful cries for help which went ringing and echoing along the

cypress-walled margins and the moss-hung colonnades of the lagoon.

Red Cam, his brain awhirl, his sight dimming as the liquor took firmer grip upon him, nevertheless heard and understood. In a moment Marston saw him staggering along the dyke, breaking his way through the willows, shading his eyes with his hand as he peered out over the water. Drunk or sober, he could hardly fail to see the 'gator now, for not more than forty feet from the dog the great saurian came surging straight through a little floating island of lily-pads in his path, his grim head and fully eight feet of his jagged twelve-foot length visible above the surface.

Fascinated, Marston watched the drama, wondering why Cam did not shoot. Amazed, he saw Cam drop his gun and make his way precariously along a huge floating pine log projecting at right angles to the bank. Clear to the end of the long log he staggered, keeping his body upright by some miracle, and there for a moment he stood, shouting and waving his arms. Then, writhing and twisting in a vain effort to regain his balance, he pitched headlong into the dark water.

When, after a space of minutes the little old man looked again for the small jet head in the place where he had last seen it, black Brutus's race for life had ended.

John Marston had charged at Chancellorsville and had endured the horrors of the last days before Appomattox. Despite his poet's soul and his gentleness, there was granite in him. He knew that Red Cam was dead. The coolest, clearest-headed man, enmeshed in the tough, clinging, tangled water-growths which spread their tentacles everywhere through the deep, still water into which Cam had fallen, could hardly have saved himself. It was death sudden and horrible, but the little old man was sensible of no thrill of horror. This was the justice of the wild. It was the woods god's vengeance. A ruthless foe of the woods creatures, a killer who killed in utter wantonness, would kill no more.

It would matter little to Cam Reppington if all that was mortal of him remained where it was for the present. Later Marston would walk to the nearest plantation house and bring back some negroes to get the body out. Just now he had a more pressing task before him.

A quarter of a mile away, safely hidden amid the reeds in a sequestered cove of the lagoon, was a small, flat-bottomed punt of which he made frequent use on his visits to the egret city. Presently he paddled in this punt close to the little island of the cypress log where Sanute the ibis, too wise to venture into those alligator-haunted waters, still

waited, watching him suspiciously as he drew near.

“Well, old chief,” said the little old man, “you’re coming to live with me for a while. Maybe I can fix that wing or maybe you’ll have to live with me always.”

With a slow, soundless stroke of the paddle, he drove the punt a little nearer the log, ready to start in swift pursuit if the crippled bird took to the water.

“A close call, Sanute,” he muttered, “a deucedly close call. But I said it and I was right. Red Cam the Killer will never lift your scalp.”

The Cat of God

THE CAT OF GOD

WHEN Fergus Gilyan came up through the virgin wilderness to the rolling country within sight of the Blue Mountains, he did not place his cabin on any of the wooded knolls that he might have chosen. Instead, he made a small clearing in a dense canebrake bordering a creek and built his little log house there in the heart of the canes.

Some say he did this for safety's sake. The Muskogees were making war talks at the time, and a house on a height would have been a temptation to roving bands raiding the Overhills, as the mountain Cherokees called their high domain of purple peaks and ranges. But there was another reason besides this one.

Gilyan was a born hunter, and the canebrake, extending for miles along the stream, was alive with game. Around his cabin on every side the smooth straight stems towered thirty feet or more, an evergreen jungle walling in his tiny clearing, a jungle so dense that he could penetrate it only by following the winding trails made by the buffalo and the deer. These trails were his highways to the outside

world. From his cabin door to the creek he cut a straight wide path through the canes. There was scarcely an hour from dawn to dusk when, sitting in his doorway, he could not see some wild animal moving up or down the creek bed across that path.

One May afternoon, when he was sitting there smoking, he saw a sight more strange. He saw a small Indian boy, a slim naked youngster of perhaps ten years, back slowly down the creek bed and, still walking backward, turn into the path. Gilyan's right hand reached swiftly for the loaded rifle leaning against the wall just inside the door. In the half-light under the over-arching canes there was something deeply uncanny about that backward-walking Indian; but in a moment Gilyan had the answer to the riddle.

A long, gaunt, yellow-brown beast followed the boy; a big she-puma or panther, wild-eyed with hunger. At a glance Gilyan knew all that he needed to know. The puma's lower jaw had been broken. Some strange mischance—probably a blow from a wild horse's hoof—had shattered it and twisted it awry, so that it hung useless and crooked. The beast had starved for days, perhaps for weeks, and now famine had maddened her.

Yet her madness had not wholly conquered her fear of man. Grimly she dogged the boy's footsteps, but because he kept his face turned to her,

she had not yet leaped upon him. Plainly, however, she had now nerved herself for the onset. Gilyan knew that in another instant she would hurl herself upon her victim.

Gilyan did not rise from his stool. He flung the long heavy rifle to his shoulder, glanced for a fraction of a second along its steady barrel. The bullet passed not six inches from the young Indian and struck the puma midway between the eyes.

Gilyan was on his feet before she had struck ground. At top speed he raced down the path past the Indian boy and the dead puma to the point where the path met the creek. There he halted and gazed eagerly up and down the sandy bed of the stream hedged in by the tall, dense canes.

He saw nothing, but he knew that his eyes had not tricked him. He knew that at the moment when he had pulled trigger he had glimpsed along his rifle barrel another face besides the one at which he aimed—a wide, flat, tawny face in the midst of which gleamed a round white spot like a gigantic eye. For an instant this face had glared at him from the end of the path close beside the creek. Then, at the crack of the rifle, the face had vanished.

Gilyan was a clean man in those days. The raw poisonous taffai rum of the traders had not blurred his eye or his brain. The face that he had seen was

no phantasm, yet he had never seen such a face before. He searched the sands of the creek margin and found certain tracks there in addition to the tracks of the she-puma which he had killed. He studied them carefully; then, sure of his woodcraft, announced his conclusions in a guttural whisper, talking to himself, as was his habit.

“Ay,” he muttered, “a big he-cub, bigger than the old she and not yet full grown; a big he-cub with a white spot on his forehead. Some day I’ll stretch his hide.”

Then he turned and walked back along the path towards the slender, copper-colored lad awaiting him beside the she-puma’s body.

This was the beginning of two things. It was the beginning of Fergus Gilyan’s knowledge of Koe Ishto (as he was afterwards known), the puma of Unaka Kanoos; and it was the beginning of the long friendship, if such it could be termed, between Gilyan, the first white man to settle on Gilyan’s Creek at the foot of the Blue Mountains, and Corane the Raven, a war captain of the mountain Cherokees.

The Indian boy whose life Gilyan saved was Corane’s son. Corane the Raven was no friend of the whites, for long ago, at a time when trouble threatened, they had captured him by trickery and

had held him as a hostage until the war drums no longer throbbed in the Overhills. But if the Raven never forgot that injury, neither could he forget what Gilyan had done. Thenceforward he was the white hunter's pledged brother.

There was one other who did not forget.

The big he-cub whose face Gilyan had glimpsed along his rifle barrel that May afternoon in the canebrake learned, that afternoon, a lesson which struck deep. Crouching behind the creek bank where the path came down to the stream, he saw his mother meet her end. He saw, too, in that same moment, a man leap from the doorway of the cabin in the clearing—a tall, stoop-shouldered man clad in buckskin and wearing a coonskin cap. In an instant the cub was gone, a lithe yellow-brown shape speeding in long bounds up the creek bed, hidden from the man's view by the canes.

Thus at the very outset of his independent career—for until then he had hunted with his mother and accepted her guidance—Koe Ishto, the puma of Unaka Kanoos, learned the deadly power of the tall buckskin-clad woodsman with whom, through no desire of his own, he was to wage a long war of craft and cunning. The experience amazed and terrified him. The young puma ran half a mile, a great distance for one of his short-winded race, before he halted; and even then his halt was only

temporary. Traveling all the rest of the day and most of the night, he pushed steadily northward through the vast, parklike virgin forest until, almost suddenly, the rolling hills became mountains. The high, humped bulk of Unaka Kanoos stood well behind the first ridges of the mountain bulwark. Not until he was back on the peak where he had been born—the peak which had always been his home until, in an evil moment, his mother had led him down into the foothills—would the big cub feel that he was safe.

Even into that lofty fastness fate followed him swiftly. Within a month after his return to Unaka he heard for the second time in his life the crack of a rifle. He fled from it, yet it seemed to pursue him, for two hours later he heard it again. An hour before sunset he ventured down to the lower slopes in search of game. He was stalking a young buck grazing a little apart from its fellows in a grassy flat under gigantic beech trees when a crashing roar deafened his ears and a fierce burning pain stabbed his right hind leg.

The wound was a slight one. It healed in less than a week. But the terror of that moment was stamped indelibly upon his consciousness; and even in his panic he recognized the man who had wounded him—a tall, stoop-shouldered, buck-skin-clad man in a coonskin cap, the man who had

leaped from the door of the cabin in the cane-brake.

Already in Koe Ishto's brain this man stood for Fear; but it was in the beech wood on the lower slopes of Unaka Kanoos that the long war between Koe Ishto and Fergus Gilyan had its real beginning. Gilyan had come to Unaka in search of deer hides. Corane the Raven, whose village lay close to that mountain, had told him of the droves of whitetails to be found there, and he had come to see for himself. To his astonishment, he had chanced suddenly upon a puma which he recognized at once. It was an easy shot; yet, inexplicably, Gilyan had failed to kill.

The incident provoked him, whetted his determination. Having shot as many deer as he could skin, he spent two days searching for the puma on the rocky upper heights of Unaka, and when, early the following spring, he returned to the mountain for another deer hunt, he searched the upper heights again. His quest was fruitless, but he found puma tracks larger than any that he had ever seen before.

He was satisfied then that the big cub, now grown to adult estate and a veritable giant of his kind, lived always on Unaka Kanoos; and again Gilyan swore—despite certain things that Corane the Raven had made known to him—

that soon or late he would stretch the huge cat's hide.

What the Raven had told him was this: that among certain clans or tribes of the red men the puma was held sacred and that this puma of Unaka Kanoos had become to the people of the Raven's clan more sacred than any other of his race. Klan-daghi was the Cherokee name for the puma kind, an honorable name, worthy of the big lion-like cats of the forest who were the greatest of all the wild hunters. But to the puma of Unaka Kanoos an even loftier title had been given—Koe Ishto—and to all the warriors and hunters he was known as the Cat of God.

There were several reasons, Corane explained, for the bestowal of this honor. Not only did Koe Ishto make his home on one of the mountains which the Cherokees held in special reverence, that huge, humped, granite peak which was the throne and couch of the Red Spirit whose voice was the thunder. He was, too, in his own might and bulk such a puma as no living hunter of the Overhills had ever seen before.

Nor was this all. There was yet another thing which set him apart. He bore upon his flat forehead just above the eyes a round white spot as big as a wild turkey's egg. Against the dark background of his upper face, this white spot stood out so

vividly that it was visible a long bowshot away. Not even the oldest hunter of the Cherokees had seen or heard of another puma bearing a mark like this upon its face. Hence none doubted the conjurers and the shamans when they said that this white spot on Koe Ishto's forehead was the mark of that Red Spirit who ranked first among the tribesmen's gods because he was the most ruthless of them all.

To all this, as Corane the Raven told it, Gilyan listened gravely. Yet there was mockery in his heart and deceit upon his lips. The very things that made Koe Ishto sacred to the Cherokee hunters rendered Gilyan all the more desirous of securing the puma's pelt.

Koe Ishto's great size and the white spot on his forehead, which Gilyan had seen for the first time on that May afternoon in the canebrake, distinguished him from all other pumas or panthers, as the early frontiersmen called the great forest cats, and would greatly enhance the value of his skin.

Moreover, Gilyan shared in full measure the typical frontier hunter's inordinate pride in his own woodcraft; and this pride had been ruffled and pricked. Outwardly he seemed to respect the Raven's wishes; but on each of his deer-hunting trips to Unaka he devoted at least two days to a

search for the white-spotted puma and tried diligently to find his lair.

Season after season Gilyan searched in vain. At last, although he did not abandon his efforts altogether, he forced himself to admit that only by enlisting the Raven's aid could he succeed. This, difficult though it seemed, might not be impossible, for the Raven was bound by the traditions of his tribe to do the will of the man to whom he owed a great debt, the man whom he had made his pledged brother.

Gilyan, confident that his opportunity would come, realized that he must not force the issue. Craftily he bided his time.

Sir Alexander Twining, Special Commissioner of His Majesty King George II to the powerful Cherokee nation whose domain was the Blue Mountains, found much to interest him in Charles Town when he landed there from the high-pooped ship which had brought him from London. Yet to Sir Alexander, a sportsman before he became a diplomat, Charles Town was only a gateway to the mysterious, alluring wilderness which lay beyond.

The preparations for his journey to the Overhills were quickly made. In early spring his caravan set out—himself and his periwigged secretary; four lean, lynx-eyed hunters selected by the Governor

of Carolina and headed by Fergus Gilyan of Gilyan's Creek, somewhat the worse for rum now that he was nearing fifty, but still one of the best woodsmen in the province; a half-dozen packhorse men and negro grooms; Conerton, the ex-trader, to act as interpreter; and five tall Cherokee warriors sent down by Moytoy of Tellequo, greatest of the chiefs, to make sure that no war party of the Choctaw or the Muskogee lurked beside the trail. Corane the Raven, one of Moytoy's war captains, commanded the Indian escort.

Of him the King's Commissioner saw but little as the cavalcade rode league after league along the narrow trail winding through the endless primeval forest. The Raven, as always distrustful of the Charles Town English, held himself aloof. As a rule, he rode with two of his braves well in advance of the column, his spear held in his right hand, his long bow slung across his broad, bare shoulders; and from the first Sir Alexander's keen eye marked the careless grace of his horsemanship, the feline liveness and strength of his tall, powerful form.

Twining, for all his airs and frills, a good judge of men, sought closer acquaintance with this war captain of Moytoy, the great chief, whom he was presently to meet in conference, but found the task discouraging. The Raven, always respectful,

wrapped himself in frigid dignity which effectually rebuffed the Commissioner's advances and soon strained his good humor to the breaking point. At last, flushed with anger, Sir Alexander reined in his horse.

"Faith, Gilyan!" he exclaimed, as the main body of the caravan came up, "the man's a lump! There's no sense or courtesy in him. You say he understands our English speech, but if so he has forgot how to wag his tongue. I give no thanks to the Cherokee king for sending so unmannerly a minion to escort me to his kingdom!"

Fergus Gilyan, who had watched the play with grim amusement, smiled.

"Corane the Raven is no friend to the English, Sir Alexander," he said slowly. "He is longer-headed than most of his breed and he knows what the coming of the white man means to his people. He does not favor this treaty which you will offer the Cherokee chiefs. If he could have his way, there would be war, not peace."

Twining ripped out an oath.

"I guessed as much," he said. "We had best watch him, then, lest he lead us into some ambush. D'ye think Moytoy plans treachery?"

Gilyan shook his head.

"No fear," he replied. "Gifts and flattery from Charles Town have blinded Moytoy's eyes. He has

been won by your plan to make him emperor of all the Cherokee tribes. Corane will obey Moytoy's commands."

Sir Alexander pursed his lips and muttered in his curled and scented brown beard, yet quickly forgot his fears. Soon the sights and sounds of the spring-time wilderness drove weightier matters from his mind. To his English eyes this trail through the teeming virgin forest was an avenue of innumerable wonders; and always, as he rode, he carried in his right hand the long rifle which he had procured in Charles Town and with which, thanks to Gilyan's teaching, he was already fairly proficient.

Again and again he tried his marksmanship. Now his target was a platoon of tall gray cranes, standing like soldiers on parade in a flower-sprinkled savannah beside the trail. Now he brought down, amid the plaudits of his comrades, a great wild turkey cock which Gilyan had pointed out to him as it perched in fancied security on a high limb of a giant pine. A half-dozen times he wasted powder and shot on flocks of green and yellow parrakeets which at frequent intervals flew screeching overhead; and once he rode a quarter of a mile along a sun-dappled forest vista towards a herd of twenty whitetails resting under the trees and, starting a small black wolf from its bed in a bunch of broom grass, killed

it with a lucky shot as it dashed towards the cover of a wild rose thicket.

“What say you now, Gilyan?” he cried in high elation as he galloped back to his companions. “What say you now to my skill? Am I good enough yet, d’ye think, to hunt your great tawny cat of the sacred mountain—that Koe Ishto of the white spotted face whose hide you have promised me when we reach the Overhills?”

It was the time of the midday halt for rest and food. Most of the party had dismounted and were standing around the fire, where the turkey cock which Sir Alexander had killed was roasting, together with several haunches of venison brought in by Gilyan’s hunters. Corane the Raven still sat his wiry Chicasaw pony a little apart from the others, but he was near enough to hear Sir Alexander’s words.

For a fraction of a second his brows contracted; and Gilyan, watching the Indian keenly, saw that fleeting shadow of a frown. The white hunter laughed carelessly as he answered Sir Alexander’s question.

“Koe Ishto is wise,” he said, “the greatest and wisest of his kind. I have promised you that we shall hunt him when we camp under the Blue Mountains because you wish a panther skin for your lady. But as for promising you his hide, there is only one

man here present who could make you that promise."

King George's Commissioner had dismounted while Gilyan was speaking. He turned towards the hunter, his silver snuff box delicately balanced in his left hand.

"And that man?" he asked eagerly.

Gilyan nodded towards the tall Indian sitting erect and impassive on his claybank pony.

"Corane's town lies in the valley in the shadow of Koe Ishto's mountain. Corane knows Koe Ishto's ways and can lead us to his lair. Corane the Raven must hunt with us or we shall fail."

For a moment Twining hesitated. Then, swallowing his pride, he turned with an engaging smile to Moytoy's war captain.

"What say you, my brother?" he asked suavely. "Wilt lead us to the den of the great cat of the mountain—this Koe Ishto of the spotted face, concerning whom Gilyan has told me many tales?"

For a long half-minute Corane the Raven, gazing straight ahead of him, his clear cut countenance as stern as that of a bronze image, remained silent. Twining's brows drew together in a frown; the blood mounted to his pale, handsome face. At last the Indian turned his head slowly and looked at Gilyan—a look which seemed at once to convey a challenge and ask a question.

The white hunter nodded; then, frowning slightly, lowered his eyes. The Raven, addressing himself to Twining, spoke gravely in his own tongue.

“Corane will lead you to Koe Ishto’s cave,” he said.

While Conerton, the interpreter, was whispering to Sir Alexander the meaning of the words, the Indian wheeled his horse and rode slowly forward along the trail.

A Cherokee woman, pounding corn beside the shallow rock-strewn river which flowed through the Raven’s village, glanced up at the huge humped mountain towering above the Indian town.

“See,” she said to the little naked girl squatting beside her, “the Thunder God sleeps. He has drawn his robe over him so that the noonday sun will not shine on his face.”

A fleecy cloud hid the upper half of Unaka Kanoos. Only the heavily wooded lower slopes of the mountain were visible, their deep, lustrous green appearing almost black in contrast with the brilliant whiteness of the cloud-curtain veiling the rocky crest. Three miles to the eastward, on a ridge across the valley, Corane the Raven noted with troubled eyes the blanket of dense vapor hiding the summit and half the bulk of Unaka. To him also this meant

that the Spirit was at home on his chosen mountain and was taking his ease there, having first thrown a coverlet of cloud over his couch so that he might not be seen by mortal eyes.

Yet the Raven spoke no word, did not slacken his pace. Fergus Gilyan, spare, wiry, endowed with sinews of steel, strode briskly close behind the tall Indian. But King George's Commissioner, puffing and blowing as the slope grew steeper, prayed silently for a halt, yet was too plucky to confess his plight.

It was already mid-afternoon. Sir Alexander's caravan had encamped in the foothills the evening before. After a long ride over the first rampart of the Blue Ridge, with but one halt by the high falls of the Whitewater, the Raven and his two companions had left their ponies at the foot of Unaka Kanoos and had at once begun the ascent.

Gilyan noted with silent approval the Raven's plans for the hunt. He knew that, unlike most pumas, Koe Ishto helped his mate kill meat for her little ones and kept watch over the cave which was their home. Evidently the Raven would waste no time seeking his quarry along the runways of the deer or in the bushy meadows where the whitetails grazed. Instead, he would go straight to the cave where the puma had his lair, the cave for which Gilyan had so often searched in vain. The white

hunter smiled with satisfaction and his lean brown fingers tightened their grip on the butt of the long rifle cocked across his shoulder.

None of the three, not even Corane the Raven, knew that as they skirted a rhododendron thicket fringing a precipitous brook, pale yellow eyes surmounted by a round white spot as big as a wild turkey's egg had gazed upon them coldly from the thicket's recesses. None of them knew that when they had passed on up the slope, a long, sinuous, tawny shape emerged from the rhododendrons and followed in their footsteps, gliding as silently as a ghost amid the massive gray trunks of the burly oaks and the towering tulip trees.

The fear in those pale eyes was stronger than the anger which was in them also. Koe Ishto had learned long since that the Raven was not his foe. But now the Raven was not alone. With him marched two white hunters; and in one of these two Koe Ishto recognized at once his most implacable enemy, the tall, stoop-shouldered, buckskin-clad white man who had wounded him long ago and who camped from time to time on the lower slopes of Unaka Kanoos and ranged widely over the rocky heights as well as the timbered valleys. The big puma feared the tall woodsman in the buckskin shirt and coonskin cap wherever he found him; but when Gilyan ranged high on Unaka or followed some trail

which would take him to the mountain's summit, the fear in Koe Ishto's eyes became an agony of terror.

This terror clutched him now. Never before had the thing which he dreaded most seemed so imminent. Early that spring torrential rains had drenched Unaka Kanoos. Through some obscure cranny water had found its way into the high cave which Koe Ishto and his mate had used for years. Hating moisture, like all the cat tribe, the mother puma had removed the cubs to another cave, dryer but in other respects much less secure, a cave situated some distance farther down the mountain.

The move had scarcely been made when disaster befell, a mischance so strange as to be almost incredible. Salali the Squirrel, the chief conjurer of the Raven's town, had climbed to the top of Unaka Kanoos to gather certain roots and herbs which grew above the clouds. At the edge of the huge precipice near the mountain's summit the conjurer stood in rapture, shaking like a man with fever, chanting the praises of the Thunder God. Then, when the frenzy had passed, an idle impulse moved him to pick up a heavy rounded stone, as big as a man's head, and hurl it into the abyss.

The stone fell into the tree-tops far below and bounded on and on down the steep slope. No trunk of oak or poplar arrested its progress. Instead, it crashed like a cannon ball into the ribs of Koe

Ishto's mate lying asleep in a shady spot near the cave where soft, fernlike mosses covered the ground. Ten minutes later the life passed out of her, and Koe Ishto, returning to the cave towards evening, found her lying bloody and stiff upon the moss.

The cubs no longer needed their mother's milk. They were old enough now to subsist entirely upon meat, and Koe Ishto easily supplied their wants. He had been hunting deer for them in the deep woods of the lower slopes when he chanced upon the Raven and his companions making their way along a trail leading to the summit, a trail which passed within a hundred yards of the cubs' new home. At once he had forgotten the deer and had shadowed the hunters as they pushed upward through the forest; and now, when the cubs' den lay not half a mile distant, the fear which had gripped him the moment he recognized Fergus Gilyan had mounted and sharpened and swelled until he was conscious of nothing else.

Sir Alexander Twining was a proud man and sound of wind and limb. But he had never before climbed mountains and at last his extremity got the better of his pride. He whispered to Gilyan that he could go no farther, and when Gilyan had informed the Raven of the fact the tall Indian stood for a moment in thought. Koe Ishto's lair, he told

the white hunter presently, still lay far ahead and above, near the summit of Unaka; but there was a spot near at hand where they might rest and spend the night in comfort, then push on towards their goal before dawn.

King George's Commissioner, flat on his back in the shade, gave a great sigh of relief when this news was imparted to him. He was too weary to move, and his heart was pounding like a hammer. They would remain where they were, he proposed, until the sun sank lower, then seek their sleeping place. The view from the spot where he lay entranced him; and the crimson and gold of a mountain sunset, painting the billowy clouds and bathing all the wooded peaks and valleys in magic light, held him there until dusk had fallen. Hence it was black night when the Raven, turning aside from the trail, led the way through the deep woods around a shoulder of the mountain to the place where they would find shelter.

A narrow ledge traversed the face of a great rock-mass at the head of a small ravine. Presently the ledge widened, forming a broad, level shelf; and behind this shelf a long, horizontal cleft, ten feet high at the entrance, struck deep into the rock. Kindling a fire, they roasted two ruffed grouse which the Raven had brought down with light cane arrows on the way up the mountain. Then the King's

Commissioner lay down on a bed of odorous hemlock boughs.

Already the night chill had descended. Sir Alexander placed his couch well within the cave where he would escape the dew. Gilyan chose to sleep in the open on the broad shelf directly in front of the cave's entrance, where the branches of a great chestnut oak, springing from the base of the rock, spread themselves ten feet above him like a canopy. Long before the fire flickered out these two were sleeping soundly.

Corane the Raven, stretched at full length on the bare rock five yards to Gilyan's left, knew that for him there would be no sleep that night. For an hour or more he lay motionless, his eyes closed; but all that while his brain was in turmoil—a turmoil of anger, none the less deep because it was sternly repressed, and sorrow and foreboding.

He was grateful for the respite which Sir Alexander's fatigue had brought. But for Twining's temporary collapse, they would have reached that afternoon the high cave which had been Koe Ishto's den for years. He had planned to station Twining and Gilyan in an ambush near the path which the parent pumas used in passing to and from the den; and probably before nightfall a rifle would have cracked and Koe Ishto's life would have ended. But the respite, after all, meant little. It merely post-

poned for a short time the sacrilege for which the Red Spirit of Unaka Kanoos would assuredly seek vengeance.

What would that vengeance be? What punishment would be visited upon him because through his connivance the Cat of God had been killed? The Raven did not know. But he was very sure that punishment would come, that it was unescapable. He had no choice, it seemed, save to do what he was doing, for such was the law—the inviolable law which commanded loyalty to a pledged brother. But his heart blazed with hatred of the man who, taking advantage of that law, had forced this course upon him. And presently, little by little, like a specter dreadful yet somehow welcome, a grim question pushed its way to the threshold of his brain.

Was there a way out, after all, a way which the gods might approve or at least excuse? It was true that on that May afternoon long ago in the cane-brake in the foothills he had given to Gilyan the pledge of lifelong brotherhood. It was true that his debt to the man who had saved his son's life was a debt so deep that it could never be forgotten. But it was true also that Gilyan had proved himself an enemy to the people of the Overhills, the people of Corane's race.

The white traders, coming up from Charles Town, brought rum to the Blue Mountains, that strong

maddening drink known as taffai, which already had all but ruined the tribes of the lower country. From his cabin in the foothills Gilyan had introduced rum to the Cherokees. For a keg of taffai many deer-skins might be had. Stealing away the red hunters' brains with his liquor, Gilyan year after year had robbed them of their pelts. Nor was this the worst. In his long pursuit of Koe Ishto, the puma of Unaka Kanoos, Gilyan had flouted the Cherokees' beliefs and had insulted their gods; and now, to curry favor with this powerful white chief who had come from beyond the Great Water, he was making the Raven himself a traitor to his own faith and exposing him to the Red God's wrath.

Suddenly there leaped full-formed into the Raven's brain a new thought. What if the vengeance which would surely come were visited not upon him alone but upon all his people? What if the Red Spirit who dwelt upon Unaka Kanoos should punish Corane's nation for Corane's crime?

The question was no sooner framed in his mind than it was answered. In a flash he knew that he had made the wrong decision, that of two evils he had chosen not the lesser but the greater. Upon him alone would rest the responsibility if he broke that law which commanded loyalty to a pledged brother, that law which required him to do as Gilyan asked. But not to him alone would punish-

ment be meted out if, through his treachery, Koe Ishto of Unaka Kanoos were killed. Always the shamans and the conjurers had pictured the Red Master of the Thunders as that most ruthless and most potent god who held all the people of the Overhills in the hollow of his hand, and who, if he were offended, might in an instant destroy them all.

Into the Raven's heart swept such fear as he had never known before: such fear as a man must feel who opens his eyes suddenly to find himself standing on the brink of a bottomless pit into which he had been about to plunge unawares. And after the fear followed horror of the thing that must now be done; and after the horror came something that was like a terrible, fierce joy.

He had loved Gilyan. Many times in years gone by they had roamed the woods together. But those years had passed, and long ago his love for Gilyan had died. Since then there was a heavy score to settle; and now the time for settling it had come.

It was Gilyan's life or Koe Ishto's. The Raven could not, by simply withdrawing from the hunt, undo what he had done. Gilyan now knew too definitely the general location of Koe Ishto's lair. He could find it without further aid, and that he would find it sooner or later was certain. The Raven knew that there was only one way in which he

could atone, only one way in which he could save his people from the calamity which he had all but brought upon them. And with that long score to settle he was glad that there was only one way.

For many minutes he did not move. He lay on his back, his eyes open now, listening to Gilyan's slow, heavy breathing, planning carefully the thing that he was about to do. At last his hand groped along the rocky surface to his left and closed upon the long knife which he had placed within easy reach beside his bow and his spear.

There would be no outcry. The King's Commissioner would awake at dawn to find a dead man lying at the entrance of the cave; and by that time the Raven would be far on his way towards the unknown wilderness beyond the headwaters of Ocona Lufta, where no white man had ever trod.

Still lying on his back, he turned his head very slowly to the right.

For some moments he was not sure of what he saw. The fire had died away to nothing. Overhead a few stars glittered. A half moon shone feebly through a thin veil of cloud. In the faint light even the Indian warrior's trained vision failed to discern the outline of the puma's form. Yet something about the shape of the stout chestnut oak limb slanting above the wide ledge in front of the

cave fixed his attention. Instinctively he studied it; and all at once he knew that Koe Ishto crouched on the limb ten feet above the spot where Gilyan lay.

Amazement held him motionless, but even in his amazement he understood. Instantly he realized that only one thing could have brought Koe Ishto to that place, that only one thing could have nerved him to mount the chestnut oak at the base of the cliff and take his stand on the limb above the ledge where the hunter was sleeping. Koe Ishto had changed his lair. He had abandoned the high cave near Unaka's summit and had brought his cubs to this other cave which he had never utilized before. The Raven knew that somewhere in the black recesses of that deep slit in the rock the cubs were hiding.

In an instant his plan was formed. It came to him suddenly, complete and perfect, as though some voice had whispered it in his ear. His right hand laid down the knife, groped cautiously for a moment, closed upon the slim, straight shaft of his spear. Very slowly, so slowly that the movement was almost imperceptible, he turned over and began to crawl inch by inch across the ledge towards the cave's entrance.

Always as he crawled he watched the vague bulk of Koe Ishto on the great oak limb almost directly over Gilyan's head. He saw the long body of the

puma tremble and stiffen, and immediately he halted and for perhaps five minutes remained motionless. Even more slowly than before, he crept forward again, until he vanished in the obscurity of the cave.

For some minutes there was no sound except the slow breathing of the two sleeping men. Then a shrill, piercing scream split the silence; the scream of a puma cub in fear or pain; a puma cub which had felt the prick of the Raven's spear.

At once Gilyan—a light sleeper, like all wilderness hunters—awoke and sat bolt upright. And at once a long, dark shape, dim, shadowy, incredibly huge, launched itself from the oak limb above and fell full upon him, smashing him down upon the rock.

He uttered no sound. His neck was broken; probably his skull was crushed. Koe Ishto, growling savagely, crouched upon the body, his long tail twitching to and fro, his eyes shining like huge emeralds lit with yellow fire. Sir Alexander Twining, awakened by harsh, shuddering growls which seemed to shake the air within the cave, raised himself on his elbow. He saw those eyes and the vague, dreadful bulk behind them, and gave himself up for lost.

Suddenly from the blackness of the cave Corane the Raven strode forward, his spear leveled. For

an interminable minute puma and Indian faced each other; and as the slow seconds passed the Raven knew that behind the emerald eyes, burning like live coals in the darkness, fury and fear were struggling for the mastery.

He could almost read in the changing glare of those eyes the progress of the struggle; and from the beginning he had little doubt as to the outcome. For one reckless moment, as the scream of his cub rang in his ears, Koe Ishto's fury had triumphed. In the madness of that moment he had hurled himself upon his nearest enemy. So much the Raven had foreseen and expected confidently; but, knowing the puma kind, he believed that this would be the end.

For as much as a minute he waited motionless, his right hand gripping the leveled spear, ready for what might happen. Then slowly he raised his left hand above his head in the gesture of peace and farewell. Next moment the burning eyes vanished and the ledge was empty except for the dead man lying twisted and limp.

It was the Indian who broke the silence. Standing at the cliff's edge, his tall, sinewy form superbly erect, his face lifted to the faint stars, he intoned in the Cherokee tongue a chant of praise to the Spirit of Unaka Kanoos, the Red God of the Thunders, Koe Ishto's master and lord, who had given the great

cat courage to serve the Raven's need. Then he turned to King George's Commissioner.

"Corane the Raven has fulfilled his promise," he said in English. "He has led the white chief to Koe Ishto, the Cat of God. When it is light he will lead the white chief back to the camp of his people."

Peregrine

PEREGRINE

FIVE hundred feet above the rocky summit of Devilhead Peak a black speck sailed slowly across the bright blue face of the sky. Dan Alexander, striding along a winding trail close to the foot of the mountain, saw that soaring speck and smiled grimly.

“You’re out early, Cloud King,” he muttered, “an’ right now you’re lookin’ things over before you decide where you’ll hunt. Better keep out o’ my way, you bloody murderer, or your hunting’ll come to a sudden end. Hello! What’s up now?”

The young mountaineer, his rifle resting in the crook of his left elbow, halted and gazed upward. The black speck which was Cloud King no longer circled above the peak. Instead, it was shooting down with that appalling swiftness which distinguishes the peregrine falcon among all the sharp-taloned hunters of the air. Wide-eyed and almost breathless, Dan watched that splendid plunge. Then with an exclamation he leaped upon a rock beside the trail whence he could look out over a small grass-grown wheat field in the bottom of the valley.

Straight toward the wheat field Cloud King, the peregrine, was falling. His long wings were half closed, so that his body had the shape of a spearhead—a spearhead rushing through space at such terrific speed that the keen eyes of the mountaineer could scarcely distinguish its form. Instantly Dan knew that in or above the wheat field Cloud King had spotted a victim, and in a moment he saw it—a ruffed grouse flying across the open only a few yards above the ground. The big bird had left an oak knoll some distance ahead of the woodsman and had taken a short cut across the field in order to reach the chestnut slope on the other side.

“You fool!” Dan whispered, talking to himself, as was his habit when there was no one else to talk to. “Don’t you know——”

He got no further, for at that moment a living thunderbolt coming from above and behind struck the grouse squarely upon the back and hurled it lifeless into the grass.

Dan, balancing his tall lean body on the rock beside the trail, watched the falcon shoot onward past the spot where his victim had fallen, swerve on stiffened wings and return with leisurely strokes to recover his prey. Low above the grass, he hovered for a moment on slowly beating pinions; and Dan was on the point of jumping down from the rock for a quick dash into the wheat field, when

something happened which brought an exclamation of astonishment from his lips.

From a thick tuft of weeds almost directly under the hovering hawk a slim reddish shape leaped into the air. Long pointed jaws snapped together within an inch of the falcon's body, and with a scream of anger Cloud King, the peregrine, shot forward and upward. Dan, craning his neck, could see plainly a big red fox trotting slowly through the sparse grass of the wheat field, the dead grouse hanging from his jaws.

For a moment amazement held the young woodsman motionless. Then a broad grin spread slowly across his thin, sun-tanned face. He watched the fox, which was well out of range, pass on across the field to the cover of the woods, while the falcon swooped and hovered overhead. Then he jumped lightly down from the rock and strode on along the trail.

So it happened that Dan Alexander, setting out one October morning on a hunt which had nothing to do with Cloud King, the peregrine of Devilhead, or with Red Rogue, the old dog fox that was Cloud King's neighbor, encountered these two old enemies of his at the very outset of his quest. Dan knew Cloud King and Red Rogue well—the Bachelors of Devilhead, he sometimes called them, because they lived mateless and alone. It was he who had named

them; for there was a romantic strain in the young mountaineer, developed by a year at college in the lowlands, which caused him to give titles of his own to those wild creatures of the mountain woods which were constantly crossing his path.

It was no feeling akin to affection, however, which had led him to study with special care the habits of the peregrine falcon and the old red fox which had their homes on the craggy summit of Devilhead Peak, looming high above his cabin. Long ago Dan had learned to look upon these two as his foes and rivals, destroyers of the game which he loved to hunt and which he regarded as his most precious possession. Again and again he had seen the evidences of their depredations, and for months he had waged an intermittent war against them. So far, however, they had thwarted all his stratagems and defied his woodcraft; and now, as he passed on along the trail, humming a tune under his breath, resentment gradually supplanted the amusement which the episode in the wheat field had inspired.

He had found delight in witnessing the discomfiture of Cloud King. That bold pirate of the airy spaces had been fooled for once; the game which he had killed had been taken away from him under his very nose. But while one of the brigands of Devilhead had thus been cheated, the other had profited. Red Rogue, the rascally fox that lived by

his wits, even as Cloud King lived by his matchless speed and indomitable courage, was at that very moment feasting upon a fat grouse—or pheasant, as Dan called it—which good luck and his own quick brain had procured for him. Dan grumbled impatiently at the thought and frowned darkly as he reviewed the little tragedy in the wheat field—a tragedy which was a sharp reminder that the two buccaneers of Devilhead were still waging destructive war on the game that he cherished as his own.

“I’ll get them two vagabones,” he muttered, “if it takes all winter. That’s all they is to it. The confounded murderous varmints! Slaughterin’ a pheasant right before my eyes!”

For a moment he was tempted to renew then and there his crusade against the marauders of Devilhead, climbing the peak and lying in ambush near the summit in the hope of getting a shot at the fox or the falcon when they returned to their homes in the great cliff just under the brow of the mountain. He had tried that method before, however, and found it fruitless, and he quickly abandoned the idea. Presently he dismissed the problem from his mind for the moment and focused his thoughts once more upon the object which had led him to take the trail that morning. On a wooded shoulder sloping down from Devilhead Peak a big wild gobbler had taken up his abode. It was in search of this gobbler

that Dan had started out with his rifle shortly after sunrise, and another half-hour would bring him to the spot where he hoped to find the turkey seeking his forenoon meal.

Some three hours later, on a saddle of a high ridge across the valley from Devilhead, a black-and-white pileated woodpecker, or logcock, hammering on a dead chestnut limb, suddenly ceased his labors. A movement far beneath him near the foot of his tree had caught his eye. Part of a large rock five or six yards from the base of the chestnut had come to life, had stirred slightly, had whisked itself away from the main mass of the rock and now lay motionless again in the rock's shadow.

The logcock observed that this thing which had moved had the exact shape of a fox's body—that it was, in fact, a fox. His curiosity aroused, the big woodpecker, almost as large as a small duck, hung motionless on his chestnut limb, watching eagerly, his long striped neck twisted sideways, his tall scarlet crest erect. He had failed to distinguish Red Rogue, the fox, taking a sun bath on the rock. Even if he had been aware that a fox was enjoying a nap fifty feet beneath him, he would not have been especially interested. But now that Red Rogue had moved, and moved so swiftly and energetically, the logcock felt that this fox was worth watching.

Presently he was aware of certain faint sounds frequently repeated and he knew at once that these sounds were the cause of the fox's sudden movement. Something was stirring in the dense kalmias clothing the steep side of the ridge just below the rock. What it was the logcock did not know; but he did know that the fox was listening to those sounds and that he found them interesting. The sounds were stealthy yet distinct, and they were drawing nearer. The intruder, whatever it was, was making its way up the side of the ridge straight for the rock behind which Red Rogue was crouching.

The logcock waited and watched, his whole attention centered upon the fox lying there in his ambush and upon those mysterious, slowly approaching sounds. Yet now and again as he waited his bright beady eyes darted swift glances out over the valley which he overlooked from his chestnut tree; and suddenly he saw something which drove all other matters from his mind.

Straight across the valley, coming from the direction of Devilhead Peak, a long-winged gray hawk was flying swiftly, heading directly toward the logcock's chestnut. The big woodpecker recognized the hawk at once as the peregrine falcon that had his aerie on Devilhead crag. For an instant the logcock glanced wildly about him. Then, as nimbly as a squirrel, he darted around the limb. His body

plastered against the wood, he watched with terrified eyes as the falcon shot past and swerved sharply upward to a perch on a dead oak some fifty paces to the right.

If Cloud King, the peregrine, perching on the topmost stick of the oak, saw Red Rogue, his neighbor of Devilhead crag, crouching beside the rock beneath him, the falcon gave no sign. He did not see the logcock in the chestnut near by, for the big woodpecker was careful to keep himself hidden behind the stout limb to which he was clinging. Cloud King must have heard the faint sounds coming at intervals from the shrubbery on the slope of the ridge below the rock, but apparently he paid no attention to them, and seemed to doze on his perch. As a matter of fact, he had come to the dead oak for a nap. He had been hunting on the wing nearly all morning, and the oak, thrusting its naked top above the other trees on the ridge, had attracted him as a suitable place for a brief siesta.

Yet sleepy as he seemed and really was, his restless eyes were not content to give themselves as yet to complete inactivity. Now and again at frequent intervals they awoke and shot keen glances here and there; and suddenly, after some ten minutes had passed, they chanced to detect a tiny spot of scarlet on a high limb of a dead chestnut near at hand. For some minutes then, though the hawk

himself did not move, those eyes remained wide awake, fiercely and intently alert; and presently they saw this scarlet spot stir slightly, grow larger and then resolve itself into the red crest and black-mustached face of a logcock peering cautiously around the chestnut limb.

What happened then happened in less time than is required to tell it; and it was an odd whim of the woods fates to bring to a crisis at precisely the same moment the little drama of the tree-tops and that other drama which, all the while, had been developing on the ground below.

Suddenly the place where Cloud King had been perching was empty. With the speed of a bullet the peregrine was shooting through the air toward the chestnut limb behind which the logcock was hiding. In that same instant Red Rogue, the fox, saw at last the victim for which he had been waiting, the mysterious maker of those stealthy sounds which for so many minutes had been drawing nearer in the kalmias.

To Red Rogue there had never been the slightest mystery about those sounds. He had known from the beginning exactly what they were; and he was not in the least surprised when a tall wild gobbler stepped out from the shrubbery just beyond the rock.

Red Rogue crouched close to the ground, his slim

body tense, his eyes gleaming. The big bronze bird had but to take one more step forward and he would come within reach of the hidden fox's leap.

That step was never taken. A shrill scream almost directly above the turkey, a wild piercing cry of utter terror, shattered the noonday silence of the woods. The gobbler wheeled in his tracks, crouched for a fraction of a second, then launched himself upward and outward from the steep mountainside. Behind him a long tawny shape bounded over the rock and hurled itself through the air; but the distance was too great and the jaws of the fox snapped together a yard or more behind the tip of the gobbler's tail.

The gobbler never saw Red Rogue, never knew how close he had been to death. Nor did he understand at first the meaning of the mad scream of panic which had startled him into sudden flight in the very nick of time. Yet, as he swept out over the valley on wide, swiftly beating wings, that scream seemed for an instant to pursue him, and he recognized it then as the cry of a frightened logcock. Once more it rang out, this time close above him in the air, and almost at the same moment a feathered projectile shot past him, plunging straight down toward the green roof of the kalmia thicket clothing the slope of the ridge. In an instant it

had vanished in the kalmias; but immediately the flying turkey was aware of a swish of wings above him, and glancing upward as he flew, he saw a gray-backed, long-winged hawk poised in the air, his fierce eyes peering downward.

The gobbler stood in no fear of hawks. Among the winged hunters of the mountains only the great golden eagles were sufficiently large and powerful to threaten his safety. This hawk that had appeared so suddenly in the air above him was not of the eagle kind. It was much smaller than those arrogant monarchs of the sky spaces—in spite of its wide spread of wing, a mere pygmy compared with the gobbler himself; and, savage though its aspect was, he felt no dread of it.

He swept serenely onward over the deep gorge-like valley, high above the tree-tops on the slope below. In spite of his bulk and weight, his powerful wings bore him easily and swiftly, and, his momentary fright forgotten, he exulted in their strength. It was good to ride the air. As a rule, his flights were short; but now, instead of swinging in toward the ridge he had just left and seeking a roost in some tree-top there, he headed straight outward across the valley. A mile or so away rose the forested slope of Devilhead ridge, his favorite feeding ground. He turned his bill toward a shoulder of that ridge where he had fed the previous day and

where he knew that he would find abundant provender.

For a few moments the gobbler, as he swept on across the valley, forgot the long-winged falcon which he had glimpsed above him. The gobbler's flight was a long and very gradual descent. The hawk, on the other hand, had mounted somewhat higher and had dropped a little behind, so that the turkey no longer saw him. Nevertheless, it was evident that he was following the turkey, for when the latter changed his course slightly, the falcon turned also and maintained his position a hundred feet above the larger bird and an equal distance behind him. Yet even if the gobbler had realized that he was being pursued, he would have felt no alarm. He could not know that a series of events that morning had fanned into utterly reckless fury the savage and fearless spirit of Cloud King, the peregrine falcon of Devilhead Peak.

All that day ill luck had dogged Cloud King. Beginning with the incident in the wheat field, where Red Rogue, the fox, had robbed him of the grouse which he had struck down, he had suffered one disappointment after another in his hunting. Three times during the forenoon he had stooped at prey only to miss it by an inch through no fault of his own. Finally, by an even narrower margin, he had missed the logcock whose scarlet-crested face

he had seen peering around the chestnut limb. This was the most exasperating mishap of all, not only because of the other failures which had preceded it, but also because the falcon had felt very sure of his game. Though they were fairly fast flyers, logcocks were not adepts in aërial strategy; and this one, detected in an exposed place, should have fallen an easy victim to the superbly swift and marvelously agile peregrine.

Perhaps this logcock was wilier than most. Perhaps it was mainly luck, combined with overconfidence on the falcon's part, which caused Cloud King to miss once more. At any rate, the big woodpecker, after uttering that first shriek of terror which had startled the gobbler into flight, had done the one thing that could save him.

Instead of fleeing at top speed, in which case he would have been overtaken in a few seconds, he had dived almost straight downward and, narrowly missing the flying gobbler in his descent, had plunged headforemost into the dense cover of the kalmia thicket clothing the slope of the ridge. Cloud King, whizzing through the air like a rifle bullet, had clutched at him with curved needle-pointed talons just as he began his plunge; but the logcock's unexpected dive had saved him, and the falcon, nonplused for an instant, had seen his hoped-for

victim drop like a plummet into the impenetrable kalmias some fifty feet below.

It was then that Cloud King, poising in the air above the spot where the logcock had vanished, saw the great gobbler shooting past beneath him; and it was then that his pent-up fury, intensified no doubt by hunger and by the excitement of his lightninglike assault on the logcock, impelled him to attempt the most spectacular exploit of his strenuous career.

Ordinarily the peregrine would never have attacked so large a bird as a twenty-pound wild gobbler. It was not that he lacked courage for such an enterprise, but simply that the instinct of his race, fixed through countless generations, would not have suggested the wild turkey as prey. The peregrine, or duck hawk, among the swiftest and most courageous of all the hawk kind, lives chiefly on wild ducks and other water fowl, where these are to be found; but in the high mountain country, where such game was rare, Cloud King, the peregrine of Devilhead Peak, levied tribute on such upland wild folk as grouse, quail, rabbits, doves and various forest birds. It had never occurred to him to seek a victim among the wild turkeys which still frequented certain parts of the mountain woods. In fact, because turkeys were rather rare and in general kept pretty carefully under cover, he had seen

very little of them during his life in the mountains and knew next to nothing about their ways.

Now, however, his fierce and venturesome spirit, roused by the irritating mishaps of that morning and in particular by the failure of his attempt upon the logcock, Cloud King determined to match his speed and daring against the weight of an antagonist larger than any other that he had ever attacked.

This great bronze-winged gobbler, appearing suddenly beneath him at the very moment when the logcock vanished in the kalmias, was a tempting target. For an instant the peregrine, hanging motionless in the air on swiftly beating pinions, was on the point of launching his assault then and there.

But even in his fury he was wise with the inherited wisdom of his race. He hung at that instant not more than a score of feet above the gobbler, and he realized instinctively that this was an insufficient height—that in attacking so huge an opponent he must plunge upon it from a much greater altitude. Hence for the moment he restrained his ardor. Instead of darting down at once upon his intended victim, he began to mount higher above it and at the same time slackened his pace slightly to let the turkey draw somewhat ahead.

There was plenty of time. The gobbler was flying straight out across the valley, evidently aiming for the ridge on the other side. Cloud King

mounted higher and higher, his fierce eyes fixed upon his prey. The bulky body of the turkey was driving forward at high speed; but Cloud King kept pace with him easily, his long tapering wings fanning the air with deliberate, measured strokes. Seemingly his fury had passed. Cool, skillful, unhurried, a perfect master of aërial warfare, he would launch his assault when the right time came and not an instant before.

On the wooded slope of Devilhead ridge, across the valley, Dan Alexander sat at the foot of a big chestnut oak and gazed out across the gorge. He was tired and disappointed. For hours he had tramped the woods on the western shoulder of the ridge, searching for the great wild gobbler which for several mornings had been feeding there. He had found many old "scratches"—places where the big bird had been feeding on previous days—but he had discovered no fresh sign. Dan gave up the quest at last, and before beginning the long homeward tramp, sat down to rest in a shady spot on the steep mountain side whence he could look out across the valley.

He had been sitting there for perhaps five minutes, his mind busy with plans for the new campaign which he intended to wage against Cloud King and Red Rogue, the marauders of Devilhead Peak, when

his gray eyes brightened suddenly. For a moment he gazed intently at some distant object straight ahead of him. Then with a low exclamation he jumped to his feet, his eyes still fixed upon the strange thing which had attracted his attention.

It was an amazing sight indeed. Far out over the valley, almost on a level with the spot where he stood, the young woodsman saw a great wide-winged bird flying straight toward him—a bird which he recognized at once. It was the wild gobbler which he had been hunting all morning, the gobbler whose scratches he had found on Devilhead ridge. But it was not solely the sight of his quarry which kindled a glow of excitement in Dan's eyes.

The gobbler was not alone. Above him, as he came on, flew another and much smaller bird—a bird whose long pointed wings, fanning the air rather slowly and yet with masterful certainty and power, marked him at once as the peregrine of Devilhead crag. The falcon was flying about a hundred feet above the turkey, and immediately Dan realized with the intuitive insight of the born woodsman that Cloud King's presence there was not accidental. Moments before the climax came the young mountaineer sensed what was to happen.

Suddenly he saw Cloud King close his wings and plunge. It seemed to Dan that the falcon did not merely fall upon his prey, but that he drove himself

downward with wings and tail at well-nigh incredible speed. More sensitive and more imaginative than most mountain woodsmen, a keen and sympathetic student of the wild things which he loved in his own fashion even while he hunted them, Dan felt his pulse quicken at the spectacle of that superbly reckless attack.

For the moment he forgot his hatred of Cloud King in admiration of the falcon's swiftness and daring; and as the winged thunderbolt struck the gobbler squarely on the back where neck and body joined, a thrill of fierce joy shot through the young mountaineer—the tribute of one good hunter to another who has proved himself master of his craft. Breathlessly, Dan awaited the next act in the drama.

It was not what he expected. A bare fraction of a second before the peregrine struck his prey the thought had flashed through Dan's mind that the falcon could not possibly kill his huge adversary at a single blow. Cloud King would strike again and again, the mountaineer expected, forcing the turkey down with repeated blows and finally stunning him or tearing open his throat. The next moment revealed the woodsman's mistake. That one blow had been enough. The gobbler was falling, shooting down at a steep slant, his neck outstretched, his wings rigidly extended.

Dan knew at a glance that the life had all but

gone out of the big bird, that he either was dying or else was stunned. Eagerly the mountaineer watched as the gobbler shot downward, expecting each instant to see the triumphant peregrine disengage himself from his victim. Faster and faster fell the turkey, his wings half closed now, his neck still stretched to its utmost length; and for an instant Dan believed that he distinguished the form of the hawk clinging to the larger bird's back.

To the very last he looked to see Cloud King leap from the feathered steed he was riding. Not until gobbler and falcon had crashed together into the tree-tops a hundred yards or so down the slope did the woodsman realize that in this game of life and death which he had witnessed something had gone amiss. He marked the spot where the birds had fallen close to a gigantic tulip poplar overtopping the other trees on the mountainside. Then, snatching up his rifle, he hurried down the slope.

Within ten minutes he found them. The gobbler lay dead, his wings spread wide, his neck twisted under him. He had either been killed in the air by the impact of the falcon's hard muscular body or else he had killed himself when he crashed stunned and helpless into the branches of the trees.

Upon the bronze body of his victim stood Cloud King. The peregrine swayed weakly, turning his head from side to side and peering uncertainly about

him; and Dan knew that for the moment at least the hawk was incapable of flight. Plainly the breath had been knocked out of him, and probably for a few minutes before Dan's arrival he had lain unconscious.

Quickly the woodsman leaned his rifle against a sapling and slipped off his coat. The gleam of excitement in his eyes had given way now to a twinkle of gratification. The gobbler was his, after all; and, better even than that, Cloud King, the buccaneer of Devilhead, the murderer of grouse and quail, was in his power at last. He could have shot the falcon as he perched dazed and impotent on the turkey's carcass. But why waste powder and bullet when it was just as easy to wring the rascal's neck?

Holding his coat in his hand, Dan approached cautiously. It was the work of a moment to throw the coat over the hawk so as to prevent him from using bill or claws. Then, folding his captive in the coat, Dan tried to lift him, only to find that the hawk's talons were still embedded in the turkey's back just above and beside the neck. He understood then why Cloud King, after delivering his blow, had ridden his victim down into the bristling tree-tops through which the turkey had fallen.

With some difficulty Dan worked the long curved claws loose from the tough muscle and sinew into which they had been driven. Then, sitting on a

rock close to the turkey's body, and gripping the falcon's legs above the talons to hold him upright, he lifted the coat carefully and looked at his prisoner.

For some minutes the young woodsman sat in silence, gazing fixedly at the peregrine. The light had returned to Cloud King's eyes. They were no longer dazed and dull. On the contrary, all their accustomed fierceness and alertness had come back to them; and it seemed to Dan that never before had he looked into eyes so proud and fearless as these.

Cloud King made no attempt to free himself. As the minutes passed, it was evident that his strength was returning rapidly. Yet he did not flutter or struggle, and although Dan had now removed the coat altogether, the peregrine did not try to strike with his strong hooked bill. He simply held himself erect in the grip of his captor and awaited, with no visible trace of fear, the doom which was surely at hand.

After long minutes Dan rose to his feet. His gray eyes were shining, but the light in them was not fierce.

"Cloud King," he said, "you're game; you're game clean through. I was going to wring your neck, but I've changed my mind."

With a quick motion of his arm, he tossed the

hawk into the air. Cloud King's long wings opened, and swiftly, buoyantly he circled upward, then shot away over the valley. Dan watched him thoughtfully for a few minutes as he sped northward toward Devilhead Peak. Then the young mountaineer turned to examine the great bronze gobbler which had so strangely become his prize.

The Golden Wanderer

THE GOLDEN WANDERER

IN THE thick woods of chestnut and oak at the foot of Slanting Pasture, wood thrushes, rose-breasted grosbeaks and blue-headed vireos were singing, each heedless of all the rest. Abruptly their music lulled. A low humming sound, which seemed to come from all directions at once, filled the air. Low as the sound was, thrush, grosbeak and vireo fell silent. A sudden stillness hung over the high upland pasture, sparkling with dew and starred with innumerable daisies—a hush heavy with expectation, laden with peril.

Possibly some finer sense than that of hearing had warned the singing birds along the forest's edge. Not until the bird chorus had lulled did the bearded, blue-shirted mountaineer, hidden in a coppice of alder near the middle of the pasture, detect that vibrant hum. At the same moment a bunch of twenty sheep grazing fifty yards to the right of the coppice caught the sound and huddled. One of their number left the flock, ran forward a few paces, then stopped, staring stupidly.

In the brief interval which had elapsed the humming sound had sharpened to a hiss. A great dark

shape was falling from the sky like a huge arrow-head—a big brown bird, its wings half closed, its curved beak pointing downward, its feathered legs, armed with long hooked talons, thrust straight beneath it. The hiss became a loud rustling noise like the rushing of wind; and in another half-second the golden eagle, suddenly checking her descent in a smother of buffeting wings, struck her grappling hooks into her prey.

The blue-shirted mountaineer in the alder coppice swore vehemently as he jumped to his feet. Of the three young lambs in Slanting Pasture, the eagle had chosen the one farthest from the hunter's ambush and least conveniently placed for his present purpose, which was, briefly stated, to kill the daring freebooter that had been raiding his flock. For an hour he had been awaiting his chance, and now that it had come it was not so sure a thing as he had hoped for, since the raider had selected a victim behind the alder thicket and not in front of it, and was thus hidden from him at the moment most favorable for a shot. It took the man only a fraction of a minute to dart around the edge of the thicket; yet by that time the eagle, alarmed by a movement of the alders, had already risen forty feet above the ground.

High above Slanting Pasture, a black speck moved across the pale-blue face of the sky. For

ten minutes this speck had been swinging there, describing wide circles and long ellipses; and for seven minutes of that ten it had looked down upon another bird of the same species soaring and circling at a lesser altitude. Then, of a sudden, the lower bird had plunged, rushing down through the hissing air straight for the green surface of Slanting Pasture, where, as usual, a flock of white sheep were grazing.

The male eagle knew that his mate had spotted her victim. Instantly he half closed his wings and slid swiftly down a steep incline, descending several hundred feet before he checked his fall with a sudden stiffening of widely extended pinions. With fierce, eager eyes he watched the familiar drama—a drama which these two tyrants of the air had re-enacted again and again in this same spot during the past several weeks. Even at that great height his eyes could distinguish every detail of the scene spread beneath him. Before his mate fell upon it, he saw the lamb at which she was aiming and knew that its fate was sealed.

Suddenly his gaze shifted to an alder thicket near the middle of the pasture. A man had emerged from this thicket and was darting around its rim. The soaring eagle's muscles tightened; his head swung lower as his dark eyes, fiercer than ever now, measured the distance between his mate, just rising

from the ground, and the unlooked-for intruder who had burst from his ambush in the alders.

The big bird knew what was coming, knew the menace of the rifle which the man had whipped to his shoulder, knew that another moment would decide the outcome. He saw the flash of the rifle, saw his mate collapse in the air and pitch heavily downward. For ten minutes after the man had carried her body away toward his cabin below the pasture the male eagle continued to sail round and round in great circles. Then he turned his bill northward toward the high summits of the Smokies, and, driving forward swiftly with powerful beats of his pinions, vanished behind a dense white cloud drifting down the long valley from the upper peaks.

Some two weeks later, an hour after sunrise, a bald eagle passed over a saddle of the highest ridge of the Smokies, traveling eastward. Though of full size, he was evidently a young bird, for he wore the uniform dark-gray livery characteristic of the bald eagle in its second year, before the head and tail have acquired the white plumage which denotes maturity. A squirrel hunter, resting for a few minutes on a flat sunny rock near the summit of the ridge, saw the big bird pass over well beyond rifle range and shook his fist at it. In the dark plumage of youth the bald eagle is virtually indistinguish-

able from the golden eagle at a little distance. The squirrel hunter took this bird to be one of the pair of golden eagles which for many years had nested somewhere amid the high peaks of the Smokies and had levied tribute not only upon the wild creatures of the upland forests but also upon the little flocks and herds of the mountain farms.

Keener eyes than those of the squirrel hunter were deceived. A male golden eagle, sunning himself on a narrow ledge of a southward-facing precipice, suddenly dropped off into the abyss. For twenty feet or so he dropped, his wings half open. Then, spreading his pinions to the utmost, he planed outward from the face of the cliff, shot upward with the impetus thus gained, and swinging around a half circle, set a straight and slightly ascending course to the eastward. A mile or more away, and perhaps a hundred yards higher, the bald eagle which had just passed over the ridge between the peaks pursued his journey, his long, wide wings steadily and strongly smiting the air. On that dark form, cleaving the thin atmosphere high above the wooded ridges and valleys slanting down from the upper Smokies, the deep-set eyes of the golden eagle were fixed with an eagerness almost terrible in its intensity.

If the bald eagle was aware from the outset of the grim pursuer speeding in his wake, he gave no

sign of apprehension or even of interest. He, too, was a king in his own right; and, young though he was, he knew his own powers and acknowledged no overlord among all the tribes of the air. With the other eagles of his own kind he had lived in peace. The big, booted, ring-tailed eagles of the mountain country he had never happened to meet.

Late that spring, seized by the wanderlust which sometimes attacks young bald eagles that have not yet chosen mates, he had left the barrier islands of the Low Country coast, the ancient home and hunting ground of his race, and had traveled far inland, crossing the middle country and the hill country and even passing beyond the highest ranges of the Blue Ridge. There, for a while, he had maintained a difficult existence in a region of high forested mountains and green cultivated valleys—a region of strange and unfamiliar aspect, ill suited to his needs. Now, his wanderlust gone, he was on his way back to the Low Country which was his proper home, a country where swamps, marshes and barrier islands abounded with game, and where sounds, creeks and rivers teemed with fish.

With that shining goal before him, the bald eagle was traveling not at the highest speed of which he was capable, but at a steady gait which he could maintain without fatigue for hours at a time. The golden eagle, on the other hand, having no long

journey in view and intent only upon overtaking the big bird ahead of him, was exerting his powers to the utmost. In less than half an hour he had drawn up to within a hundred yards of the other and at the same time had mounted to approximately the same level. Not until then did the bald eagle betray knowledge of his pursuer's approach; possibly not until then was he aware that he was being pursued. Suddenly he swerved from his straight course, swinging to the right in a wide circle and spiraling upward, at the same moment uttering a fierce, cackling scream.

For several seconds the golden eagle held his onward way. Then he, too, swung to the right and circled upward. But he did not answer the other's challenge, and he did not, as a human onlooker might have expected, hurl himself at once upon the stalwart stranger whose piercing eyes, no less arrogant than his own, denoted a spirit by no means averse to a battle in the air. For a few minutes the two regal birds, equals in size and martial bearing, circled and sailed in close proximity, each watching the other narrowly and each evidently prepared for any hostile move that the other might make. Then the bald eagle swung sharply to the left and, passing within ten feet of the golden eagle, resumed his journey.

Yet as though not quite sure that he would not

have to enforce his right of passage through the territory ruled by this tawny-headed monarch of the peaks, the wide-winged traveler kept a watchful eye on the air road behind him; and presently he saw that the tawny-headed one had ceased soaring and circling and was trailing him again at a distance of four or five hundred yards. He saw also, however, that his pursuer was no longer rushing forward at full speed as though bent upon attacking him. The golden eagle's wings fanned the air no more rapidly than those of the bald eagle, and the distance between the two birds was not diminishing. The bald eagle, watchful and unafraid, but too intent upon reaching his far-off home to pick a fight by the way, held his straight eastward course.

Hour after hour the two great birds traveled thus in company, the bald eagle leading, the golden eagle following in the other's wake. All that forenoon they sped on, high above gunshot range, mile after mile, league after league, until they no longer saw mountains or even hills beneath them, but a rolling, undulating country dotted with farms and with towns. Their course was now decidedly south of east, and gradually the land under them was growing flatter and the wooded areas more extensive.

When, in late afternoon, the leader turned off at right angles from the winding sluggish river which for several hours he had been following as a guide,

the cleared spaces had grown fewer and smaller, the farms were more widely scattered, and forest covered most of the face of the land. Down to this forest the bald eagle slanted toward dusk, coming to rest in the top of a tall cypress surrounded by other cypresses, black gums and magnolias; and after him the golden eagle swung down also to a perch in another great moss-bearded tree near by.

In this way the golden eagle of the high Smokies came to the Low Country of the coastal plain after the death of his mate. Probably loneliness more than anything else was responsible for the whim which had caused him to follow for hundreds of miles the big dark-gray stranger whom he had at first mistaken for his lost consort. The eagle, when he chooses a mate, is wedded to her for life. For fifteen years these golden eagles of the Smokies had lived together, and when on that morning in Slanting Pasture their long comradeship came to an end, there had begun for the survivor a period of incessant restlessness and gnawing discontent.

Somehow he knew what had happened, knew that his mate was lost to him. Yet, incapable of comprehending the significance of death, day after day he had looked for her, ranging far and wide over the ridges and valleys. In all the blue and purple wilderness of mountain and sky, he was alone. No other golden eagle lived within fifty miles of his

aerie; for he and his consort had kept their kingdom against all comers, and year after year the two young eagles which they reared each spring were no sooner able to shift for themselves than their jealous sire gave them to understand that their presence was no longer desired.

Hence when his mate was killed he had found no other of his own kind to keep him company. For two weeks he had patrolled his familiar hunting ground, winging restlessly from peak to peak, killing his prey where he found it, his eyes ceaselessly searching the mountain-rimmed horizons and the blue emptiness of the upper air. Then came the morning when, as he dozed at one of his favorite lookout stations near the summit of a towering peak, he roused suddenly to see a great royal bird, of somber plumage and as wide of wing as his mate, journeying eastward a mile or so away. For a brief interval he had believed that his long quest was over.

The disillusionment which doubtless came to him long before he had overtaken the newcomer could not dispel altogether the impulse which had sent him instantly in swift and eager pursuit; and even after he had found the dark-gray stranger to be a male bird of another species bold enough to challenge him to battle, the loneliness which oppressed him caused him not only to ignore the challenge but even to follow where the other led. This was not the com-

panionship which he desired without understanding that he desired it. But it was companionship of a sort; and mile after mile slipped past beneath him, and before he realized it he had traveled beyond the frontiers of his own domain.

Having journeyed so far, it was perhaps only natural that he should follow his new comrade throughout the rest of that day. Hence when dusk fell and the bald eagle, still some forty miles short of the barrier island which was his ultimate goal, sought a lodging for the night in a great swamp well within the bounds of the Low Country, the wanderer from the Smokies found himself, a few minutes later, at rest in a dense wood of tall straight-stemmed trees not utterly unlike the familiar balsams of his mountains.

If the feathery-foliaged cypresses, in spite of their ghostly draperies of gray Spanish moss, faintly recalled the fir forests of his upland home, all else was new and strange. Darkness quickly shut the surrounding woods from his view; but these woods were full of night noises such as he had never heard before; noises which oppressed even his bold spirit with a sense of vague disquiet. The noises—sometimes low and guttural, sometimes hoarse and loud—came from tall trees fifty yards to his left, where the dry floor of the swamp sloped gently down to the edge of a small lagoon; and the eagle did not

know that those trees held the bulky nests of a company of great blue herons which still used the spot as a roosting place, although the breeding season was long past.

The intermittent clamor of the herons waked him at frequent intervals during the night; and being thus wakeful, he heard other sounds also, only a few of which he recognized. Some of these came from tree-tops near at hand; others floated up from the blackness directly beneath him—faint rustlings as of large animals moving through brush or reeds, occasionally a stamping as of hoofs on hard ground, once a shrill scream followed by a short scuffle amid leaves or rushes.

Dawn found him alert and eager, his strong muscles rested, his appetite keen. Amid the distractions of his new surroundings he had forgotten his fellow voyager. It did not occur to him to look for the bald eagle in the neighboring tree-top, and he did not see the latter leave his perch shortly after dawn and head away to the southward on the last lap of his journey. More interesting sights engaged the attention of the mountain-bred golden eagle, looking about him for the first time in the big Low Country swamp.

While the light was yet faint he heard the swish of wide wings above him and saw a dim shape sail overhead in the gloom. Presently came another and

another, until the air seemed alive with the sound of wings; for the tall blue herons in the roost at the eagle's left were early risers and most of them were off for their fishing grounds in the river marshes and the wet rice fields before day had fairly come. A little later, a whitetail buck followed by two does walked slowly along a winding trail through a bed of reeds almost directly beneath the eagle's perch, and he knew then the meaning of the faint rustling sounds which he had heard in the night. A barred owl, returning from his hunting, winged silently past. Two wood ducks shot by like bullets, heading for the lagoon beside the heron roost. Many squirrels, some of which were much larger and of a darker gray than those of the mountain woods, moved about in the trees on every side. These big iron-gray, white-nosed squirrels he watched with especial interest. He had never seen their like before, but he knew that they were savory meat, and his hunger was growing more and more insistent. Motionless on his perch near the top of the cypress, he awaited his chance.

Close to the foot of a big black gum a long, thick-bodied, black-and-red snake emerged from a hole under a root. One of the smaller gray squirrels saw it and ran chattering down the trunk of the gum, lying there head downward, scolding excitedly. Presently, as the snake glided slowly on, the squir-

rel leaped to the ground, to be joined there by three others which came running from as many directions. The eagle waited and watched. But the big white-nosed squirrels upon which he had set his heart kept to the trees; and the eagle, more adept at striking his prey on the ground, finally picked one of the smaller grays as his target and poised himself for the plunge.

In the nick of time fate intervened to save the furry busybody. A twig cracked behind a tangle of grapevine and smilax and the squirrels scampered in all directions, each making for the nearest tree. The eagle, his neck stretched downward, his wings half opened, saw a tall bronze bird step into view from behind the vine tangle and recognized it instantly—a wild turkey gobbler, taller and bigger than any that he had ever seen among his native mountains.

Without a sound he dropped from his perch, fell like a plummet halfway to the ground, then, half opening his wings, slid swiftly down a steep incline, his body slanting sideways, his widespreading claws open beneath him. Next moment the wild gobbler's big wings were beating the grass in the death agony.

The eagle, busily plucking the great bronze carcass, did not know that delicate pointed ears, alert to catch all woods sounds, had heard the convulsive threshing of those powerful wings. A hundred

yards down the wind two gray foxes, hunting together, halted abruptly at that strange, sudden commotion, listened eagerly and wonderingly, then trotted forward, sniffing the air. From behind a fringe of low canes they surveyed the situation. Then in some subtle, soundless way known only to foxes, they agreed upon the strategy which the problem demanded.

The male trotted boldly forward, heading straight for the spot where the eagle stood upon the turkey's body. The female circled to the left and approached the eagle from that side. Two minutes later the big bird, his hooked bill full of turkey feathers, saw two foxes—not rusty-red like those of the mountains, but gray with white and russet markings—leaping toward him with bared fangs. One fox he might have defied, but with one assailant in his front and another at his flank the odds were too heavy. With a scream of anger he rose and, circling upward, left his prey to the wily schemers of the swamp woods who had schemed their way to a feast.

One taste of juicy flesh, torn from the breast of his victim just before the foxes had appeared, served only to sharpen his hunger. As he spiraled upward above the woods his eyes searched the tree-tops and the sky and swept the distant level horizon. To the eagle of the Smokies, all that they saw was

bewilderingly strange; for here was no tumbled terrain of ridge and valley, but a flat expanse clothed for the most part with pine forest. Athwart this pine forest lay the cypress and gum swamp where he had spent the night, a green belt four or five miles wide and many miles long; while scattered here and there were houses and cultivated clearings and larger areas, of vivid green bordered and blotched with olive, which he took to be pastures, but which were really wet prairies of tall rushes and abandoned rice fields. In a dozen places he saw the glint and glimmer of water; and far away to the southward a river wound like a gigantic glittering serpent through sunny verdant flats walled in by luxuriant woods of oak, hickory, magnolia and other broad-leaved trees.

But the strangeness of the panorama, so utterly unlike his mountain home, engaged the eagle's attention only momentarily, if indeed he was really conscious of it all. He was hungry, and what chiefly interested him was the life which he saw around him in the air. Whereas in his mountains the air was nearly always empty except perhaps for a solitary buzzard, hawk or raven, here in this new hunting ground the golden eagle saw big birds soaring on every side or flying at lower levels with measured, deliberate wing strokes.

Some of these birds were turkey vultures pre-

cisely like those that he had always known. Others, though he had never seen them before, he recognized as belonging to the vulture kind, and to these he paid little attention. But circling higher than any of the vultures were three long-necked, long-tailed birds which he watched with lively interest; while at frequent intervals other large wide-winged wayfarers, some of them snowy white, others gray-blue and white and reddish-purple, passed back and forth beneath him.

Perhaps a little bewildered by so great an abundance of life, the eagle continued for nearly half an hour to sail idly in great circles. Then he seemed suddenly to reach a decision. For no definite reason, he followed the course of the river, winding between wet rice fields overgrown with lotus, cattails and other water plants, and flanked with woods. In the rice fields scores of herons were feeding, while many gallinules floated on little ponds and creeks bordered with wampee and reeds. About midday he killed a wood duck; then, when he had eaten it, he rested for a while in a tall pine beside the river, and in mid-afternoon resumed his journey, still traveling southward. In that direction lay the salt marshes of the coast, the long wooded barrier islands, and beyond this chain of islands the sea. In sight of the ocean, he turned northeastward, flying up the coast high above the marshes; and he

slept that night in a stunted live oak in a dense junglelike island forest, with the thunder of the Atlantic rollers booming in his ears.

About five o'clock of a sultry August afternoon, Capt. Mat Norman, daydreaming at the wheel of his little motor freighter, was roused suddenly by the swish of many wings. Kicking over the stool upon which he had been sitting just aft of the low cabin, he reared his stocky body to its full height, muttering an exclamation of surprise. At the same moment a red Irish terrier, which had been sleeping on top of the cabin, scrambled to his feet and began to bark. With a brief command Norman quieted the dog.

Then he stooped and called through the open door of the cabin, "Look here, York, if you want to see something."

A tall negro in grease-stained blue overalls emerged, glanced quickly around and ahead, then plunged into the cabin again. In a moment he reappeared, a rusty single-barreled shotgun in his hand. Norman spoke sharply, peremptorily:

"Nothing doing, York. In the first place, I don't like it, and in the second place, it's against the law. You can shoot plover and curlew now and then, but you can't shoot those."

The negro grinned sheepishly, accepting the in-

evitable, and for a few moments the two men stood in silence, watching.

What they saw was a sight familiar enough to both of them, yet in certain respects unusual. At a bend of the winding creek, brimful with the rising tide, a flock of more than a hundred wood ibises had risen from the marsh directly ahead of the boat and hardly more than fifty feet from her bow. The air ahead and above was full of great birds as big as geese, their wide, white, black-edged wings laboring mightily, their long, curved bills and slender necks outstretched, their slim legs dangling grotesquely or trailing behind. Norman, a lover of birds, watched them eagerly. He knew the wood ibises well. From June to October they abounded on the salt marches, and every summer he saw them almost daily as he plied the marsh creeks in his launch. But it was rare good luck to get so close to a flock, and this flock was larger than most. Norman tried to count the birds as they sailed and drifted about in the air, rising higher and higher, then floating lazily toward the woods on the barrier island a mile to the eastward. York Hawley, his newly hired deck hand, interrupted his calculations.

"Look yonder, Cap'n," said the negro, pointing to the west. "Dat eagle comin' mighty fast."

Norman, looking where York pointed, watched the eagle come on, noting with a thrill of admira-

tion the speed at which it was driving through the air. Yet for some moments he did not suspect the big bird's design. The bald eagles of the coast lived at peace with most of the feathered tribes. They killed some ducks in winter, and in the fresh-water country of the mainland they often dined on coots; but on the salt marshes and about the barrier islands they subsisted mainly on fish. The birds of the marsh creeks and the island inlets—ibises, herons, egrets, terns, skimmers, curlews and pelicans—they seldom molested. Norman never guessed that this eagle—which he took to be a one-year or two-year-old bird, since it lacked the white head and tail of the fully adult bald eagle—was about to show him something that he had never seen before.

Most of the wood ibises were flying in loose array toward the barrier island woods. Three of them, however, had left the main flock and were sailing in circles about three hundred feet above the marsh. The eagle, perhaps a hundred feet higher in the air, was heading toward these three; and suddenly, when he was almost but not directly over the highest of them, he half closed his wings and plunged, his body tilting forward, his tail spread like a fan, his hooked bill and widespread talons thrust downward. Mat Norman, wide-eyed and breathless, saw him strike the ibis with terrific force on the back where neck and body joined, grapple with his prey

for a brief instant, then release it. The ibis dropped like a stone. The eagle swung down in a wide spiral to the spot where his victim had fallen into the tall marsh grass.

Mat Norman, a thoughtful man like many of his kind, brooded long over what he had seen. He had witnessed what to him was almost a miracle. He had seen a law of the wild reversed, a rule of Nature broken. All his life he had known the eagles of the coast and never had he seen one of them do what this eagle had done. For two hours, as he steered his launch along the sinuous placid marsh creeks, he turned the problem over in his mind, and gradually a suspicion which had dawned in him took more and more tangible form as affording the only possible solution.

He determined to keep an especially sharp lookout for a big dark eagle which at a distance appeared to be a bald eagle in the somber plumage of youth, but which, upon closer examination, might prove to be something else—something so rare on the Low Country coast as to be practically unknown there. And although he was not in the habit of killing eagles, he decided to conduct this search with a gun.

A month passed before he had an opportunity to test his theory. Meanwhile tales came to him which strengthened his belief in his own reasoning. On two mainland plantations lambs disappeared

mysteriously, and the ground showed no tracks of either man or wildcat, while the best hounds could strike no trail. Of greater concern to Norman was the fact that on the marshes wood ibises seemed to be growing shyer and rarer. One morning he saw a flock scatter and break with every evidence of panic as a big, dark, wide-winged bird sailed into view; and some days afterward a negro fisherman told him that he had seen an ibis killed in mid-air. Then another lamb was taken, and this time the owner saw the slayer—an eagle. The word went forth; and Norman knew that the bald eagles, which he admired for their strength and kingly bearing, must now expect sterner persecution at the hands of man. His resentment grew. On his trips along the marsh creeks he watched the sky with increased vigilance, and whenever he visited the wooded barrier islands his double-barreled gun went with him.

Mat Norman made his living by hauling freight in his launch through the maze of tidal waterways threading the wide wastes of marsh between the Low Country mainland and the chain of islands along the edge of the sea. Sometimes when business was slack he landed on one of these islands to fish in the breakers or to search for turtle eggs in the sands; and when, one crisp September morning, York Hawley, the colored marshman who was serving him temporarily as deck hand, suggested that

the big channel bass were probably running in the surf, he merely expressed a thought which was already in Norman's mind. A half-hour later the launch lay at anchor in a deep narrow inlet separating two islands of the chain; and Norman, bidding Rusty, his Irish terrier, make himself comfortable in the cabin, went ashore, with York at the oars.

Landing on the steep sandy bank, they walked a quarter of a mile up the inlet strand, heading away from the ocean beach. The first necessity was to catch some mullet for bait, and for this purpose York carried a cast net slung over his shoulder. Norman, in accordance with his custom of the past few weeks, had brought his shotgun, and also, as an afterthought, the field glasses which he kept on the launch. Walking briskly along the inlet shore toward the back beach of the island where a small creek abounding in mullet swung in from the marshes, Norman was a little in the lead. Suddenly he halted, groped for the binoculars hanging from his shoulder by a leather thong and looked long at some object around the curve of the beach.

"York," he said, when his companion had come up, "the bass can wait a while. I think that's our friend the enemy over there." And he pointed to a big dark bird perched in a lone dead oak perhaps a third of a mile away.

The tree stood on the marshy back beach close

to the edge of the island woods. It required less than twenty minutes to circle back amid the sand dunes above the inlet beach and then steal silently through the junglelike woods to a point within easy range of the dead oak. Lying behind a myrtle bush on a low dune, Norman again trained his glasses on the big bird in the tree.

Almost at once he gave a grunt of satisfaction. His theory was proved. This was no bald eagle in the dark uniform plumage of immaturity but a splendid adult golden eagle. He could see plainly the great bird's tawny crown and cowl, the dark band at the top of its tail, and, most conclusive of all, the booted legs, feathered clear down to the toes, which distinguish the golden from the bald eagle in any plumage phase.

Norman dropped his glasses and reached for his gun. His quest was over. This slayer of ibises and of lambs, this bloody-clawed wanderer from some distant mountain top, had been run down at last. Norman, fiercely exultant, knew that he could not miss.

York Hawley, lying on the sand beside him, whispered hoarsely, urging haste. The marshman's practiced eye had detected a slight movement of the eagle's head, an almost imperceptible quiver of his folded wings.

Norman, bending his neck to sight along the gun

barrel, swore with vexation. The eagle had launched forward from his perch and was flapping directly away from them over the marsh, the trunk and branches of the tree screening him from a wing shot.

Of the two, Hawley, an inveterate hunter, was the better woodsman. He was confident that the eagle had not detected their presence; and knowing the ways of bald eagles, he believed that this eagle, though of a different species, might presently return to the lone dead oak, which was probably one of his regular lookout stations. It was at York's suggestion that the two hunters remained in their ambush for a while and presently saw something which Mat Norman would not have missed for worlds.

The golden eagle of the Smokies did not know, as he spiraled upward over the marsh plain, that he had escaped death by a hair. He had not seen the hunters in the myrtle clump behind him. What he had seen was a dark speck against the bright blue sky bent above the marshes—a dark speck which swung round and round in interweaving circles, gradually drawing nearer.

His keen eyes told him that it was an eagle. Long ago he had learned that these eagles of the coast were not of his kind; yet, urged on by that vague discontent which had troubled him ever since the

death of his mate, he seldom saw one of these eagles in the distance without flying close enough to it to make sure of its identity. Possibly, if birds can hope, some dim, half-formed, uncomprehended thought of again finding his mate burned in him. More probably it was simply loneliness which impelled him, a desire for the companionship of his kind.

But always one of two things happened. Either he turned away disappointed when he was yet at a distance from the stranger, or if he approached too near, he was met with an angry scream which was plainly a warning and a defiance. Fearless though he was, and accustomed to rule the air, at first he felt no impulse to fight; as on the occasion of that first meeting above the ridges of the Smokies, the longing for companionship overcame his natural pugnacity. But gradually, though the longing was as strong as ever, something within him began to rebel at these rebuffs. At last, challenged by a young bald eagle in the dark-brown plumage of the first year, sudden rage flamed up in him, and in a short sharp combat five hundred feet above the woods he taught the inexperienced youngster a lesson.

Scarcely three days had passed since that encounter. As he now circled upward, his gaze fixed on the big bird soaring on motionless wings a mile

or more to the northward, high above the marshes, it was not the desire to do battle which possessed him, but that indeterminate yearning which was always with him. Yet the battle which he had fought and won had worked a change. It had awakened something in him which had been asleep. When, presently, his farsighted eye caught a glint of silver as the sunlight flashed on the snowy head of the big adult bald eagle soaring in the distance, the golden eagle of the Smokies did not return disconsolate to his lookout station in the dead oak. Instead, he continued his spiral ascent, seeking an altitude equal to that of the white-headed stranger still wheeling in wide circles which were slowly bringing him nearer.

Again it was York Hawley, the marshman, who first realized that something was about to happen. Norman, skeptical of his quarry's return, was dozing on the sand, his head pillowed on his arm; but Hawley had followed the eagle's upward flight and his eyes were fixed upon it when another eagle, whose white head and tail gleamed like silver in the sunlight, sailed into the field of his vision. He saw the tawny-headed bird swing close to the silver-headed one and he heard the latter scream his challenge. York roused Norman just in time for him to see the beginning of the battle.

It was the golden eagle that attacked. From

above and behind he shot down upon his foe, his wings half closed, his talons spread. But this time his opponent was no raw novice of untested courage and skill. Quick as light, the bald eagle dodged the blow, poised for a brief instant, then plunged for his assailant, whose swift descent had carried him down some fifty feet. In his turn, the golden eagle swerved as adroitly as his enemy, hung momentarily motionless, dropped like a falling spearhead on his antagonist.

To Norman it seemed that the bald eagle, despite the disadvantage of his position, deliberately awaited this attack—that he threw himself on his back in the air, his talons thrust upward, and met the shock gallantly and squarely. At any rate, the two big birds came together and grappled; but just before the impact, the golden eagle, spreading and flattening his wings, checked the speed of his descent so that the collision was not of stunning force. For a space the combatants fell swiftly, apparently locked in close embrace. Then somehow they righted themselves, and bill to bill and claw to claw, came down rather slowly, lunging and parrying, turning round and round, their pinions churning the air.

Suddenly it seemed to Norman that the wings of one of them—he could not tell which—stiffened, then sagged. Next moment they were falling again,

faster and faster, still locked together, madly whirling. They struck on hard sand just where the inlet shore curved around to the marshy back beach—sand packed almost as hard as concrete by the tides. Norman knew before he reached them that both were dead.

Yet he was curious to learn which one of them it was that had died in the air when those battling wings had stiffened and drooped. The bald eagle's curving claws were sunk in his enemy's throat and breast. They must have been entangled in tough sinew or embedded in bone, for it was only with an effort that Norman could release them. They had made a mortal wound. But the great yellow talons of the golden eagle were clasped about his enemy's white head, and one long black claw had struck deep into the brain.

Mat Norman was a man of odd fancies. He would not leave the dead warriors on the sands to become prey for the vultures or for some nocturnal prowler from the island woods. York took the cast net and went after mullet in the creek, for he was keen to feel a big channel bass tug at his bait in the surf. But Norman found a piece of plank washed ashore by the waves, and with it he scooped out a grave on the sunny slope of a dune under a tall tuft of sea oats. These two were chiefs of the air, he said, and deserved an honorable burial.

Thanks to Ringtail

THANKS TO RINGTAIL

RINGTAIL, the old gray fox, whose plummy brush was strangely barred with black, sat on his haunches just within the thicket's edge and calmly surveyed the situation. He found it not altogether satisfactory. As usual, twenty or thirty buxom white hens were moving about on the lawn in front of the house. But they were all well out in the open, too far away for the fox to attempt a raid. Moreover, on the front steps of the house stood the boy talking with his father; and the boy, clad in khaki shirt and corduroys, held his shotgun in the hollow of his arm. Evidently he was going hunting this morning and was ready for action.

Ringtail had considerable respect for the boy as a hunter and woodsman. He knew Chad Stanton well, having watched him often in the woods; and possibly he was aware—for a fox is often wise as well as cunning—that Chad knew something about him, too, and would welcome a chance to test the thickness of his hide. It was not a fox hunt that the boy was planning, for Ringtail saw no horse and no dogs. Nevertheless, the old fox decided

that he had better move along. Plainly, conditions were not favorable just then for another attack on Chad's big white hens.

Ringtail paused long enough to scratch one black-tipped, rusty-red ear with a hind foot. Then he turned and trotted silently away through the casena thickets. Before long, his thoughts occupied with other matters of more immediate interest, the fox had forgotten the young hunter roaming somewhere in the woods with his gun.

The boy moved softly, slowly, all his senses alert. In that place and at that hour anything might happen. As yet the morning light had barely begun to filter down through the dense evergreen foliage of the pines; but scattered through the pine wood were other trees—oaks and maples and sweet gums—already almost bare of leaves; and wherever one of these trees stood amid the pines, light was let in to illumine the dim interior of the forest. Chad was grateful for this light, yet found it baffling. Three times he halted suddenly, convinced that he had seen some living thing move on the carpet of brown pinestraw far away amid the trees; and three times he owned that his keen, practiced eyes had been deceived.

The thing that he hoped to see was a wild turkey. A visitor, a friend of his father's, was expected at

the plantation, and to Chad had fallen the duty of securing a turkey for the occasion. His father would have preferred a pair of wood ducks—summer ducks, as they were called in the plantation country—but a closed period of several years had been granted these birds by law, and Captain Stanton was too good a sportsman to be a law-breaker. Hence, although in the plantation country, with its many rivers and lagoons, wood ducks were still abundant all the year round, the old planter had regretfully reminded his son that they were taboo.

“Try for a turkey,” he told the boy, as they stood talking on the front steps early that morning. “The Judge likes summer ducks better and is probably counting on them. But he can’t have them this time; and a turkey’s the next best thing.”

Chad knew even better than his father the places which were most likely to yield the game that he sought. Yet poor luck had attended him so far, and now the early morning, the most favorable time for turkey hunting, had passed. Nevertheless, his hopes were high as he stole with infinite caution and hair-trigger alertness amid the trunks of the great trees deep in the Otter Woods as he called them because once he had watched an otter there for over an hour.

He knew that several turkeys, including one big

gobbler, sometimes came to these woods in the early forenoon for a midday siesta. Twice he had startled this gobbler from the same tall pine. He planned now to post himself in ambush near the foot of this pine and wait for the gobbler to come in for its noontide nap; and meanwhile, as he approached the place, he scanned the wood's vistas keenly because more than once he had found amid the pine-straw scratches which proved that turkeys occasionally came there to feed.

Presently, when the gobbler's big tree loomed close in front of him, he found a spot which suited his purpose. Sitting on the pinestraw, his back against the trunk of a young water oak at the edge of a small thicket of gallberry which partly encircled him, he was almost invisible in his dun corduroy and khaki—a soundless, inconspicuous figure, motionless as a stump. Probably a long wait lay ahead of him, but he looked forward to it with satisfaction, even with pleasure.

He knew that the woods, lonely and empty though they seemed, were alive. Softly as he had moved, he was aware that keen ears had heard him, though he could not tell what ears. Keenly as he had scanned the ground and the branches, he was sure that sharp eyes which he had not been able to see had studied him as he made his way amid the tree trunks.

He knew also that the woods' folk as a rule have short memories and that it is movement which attracts and holds their attention. After he had remained for a little while motionless and silent in his ambush, he would be forgotten by some, ignored by others of the lesser forest creatures; and while most of the larger woods' dwellers moved about mainly at night, there was always a chance that some venturesome or unusually hungry prowler would pass nearby.

For a while he saw and heard only the smaller people of the woods—inquisitive ruby-crowned kinglets scolding peevishly and peering at him with round, beady, little eyes; acrobatic tufted tits swinging head downward amid the higher branches; blue-gray, white-breasted nuthatches traveling up and down the tree trunks like deliberate feathered mice and talking incessantly to one another in nasal, unvarying tones. Soon, however, a big, white-nosed, iron-gray fox squirrel showed himself near the top of a pine; and presently, from a small, steep-sided stream which wound through the wood fifty feet in front of his ambush, came a subdued splash which told the boy that some large bird or mammal had moved in the water. He wondered whether another otter had taken up its abode in the Otter Woods, and for some minutes he considered the advisability of creeping forward cautiously to a point whence

he could see the surface of the brook. Suddenly, however, a slight movement to his right drove this plan out of his mind.

Crouching close to the ground, a big male gray fox was creeping slowly across the pinestraw carpet. Chad's eyes gleamed as his lips silently framed two words. "Old Ringtail," he whispered under his breath and his hand tightened on the barrel of his gun. Yet, though the fox was within easy range, the boy made no further move.

He owed old Ringtail a grudge. The big gray fox, with the strangely barred tail which was unlike the tail of any other gray fox ever seen in that region, had raided the plantation poultry flock on at least two occasions and had carried off at least two fine hens. But to Chad, Ringtail had long been a sort of hero because of the almost incredible skill which he had shown in baffling the best fox hunters and the best fox dogs of the neighborhood. Many stories were told of his cunning, and at least some of them were true; and the boy, though he himself was an ardent hunter, found a keen pleasure in these accounts of Ringtail's prowess and was conscious of a certain sympathy for the old dog fox who had proved himself more than a match for the finest hunting packs. True, when he had satisfied himself by an examination of certain tell-tale tracks that it was Ringtail who had stolen his hens, Chad had

vowed to have revenge. Yet, now that the chance had come, he held his hand.

He waited because he was a woodsman before he was a gunner—because his interest in the ways of the wild folk was stronger than his desire for revenge; and he realized at once that the old fox was planning something, that he was even then preparing some exploit which would be worth watching. Ringtail's whole attitude, his every movement showed that he was deeply absorbed in some important and pressing piece of business; and Chad's eyes searched the woods in front, striving to determine the fox's purpose.

Plainly he had scented game. As he crept forward, very slowly and cautiously, his delicate feet making no sound, at times his pointed nose was raised high, moving from side to side. He was creeping straight toward the little creek winding through the forest behind steep banks which hid the water from view; and Chad, realizing that the wind blew from the creek toward the fox, suddenly remembered the splashing sound which he had heard in the brook a few minutes before.

He watched the fox eagerly, convinced that he had found the key to old Ringtail's strategy, though he was still in the dark as to what creature it was that had made that splash. He reflected, however, that Ringtail knew what he was about; that he was

relying not upon sound alone but upon an even surer guide than sound; that his wonderful nose told him precisely what it was that lurked in the creek-bed or on the surface of the water. And, as had happened often in the past, the human hunter felt a thrill of envy as he considered that marvelous power of scent which is of greater value to the four-footed hunters than either sight or hearing—of greater value, even, than strength or speed.

The minutes passed. Still the old fox crept forward, moving more and more slowly as he neared the creek-bank, sometimes almost crawling on the ground; and still Chad waited, tense and motionless, forgetful of the gobbler in search of which he had come to the Otter Woods. Twice Ringtail had changed his direction slightly; and although he had heard no sound from the creek-bed, the boy knew that the creature lurking there had twice moved a little farther up the stream. At last the fox crouched upon the very brink of the bank, just behind a small tuft of yellow, half-dead weeds. There he remained, still as a graven image, ears flattened, head raised an inch or two above the ground and pointing down the stream.

Minute followed minute until it seemed to Chad that fully a quarter of an hour must have passed. Then, just as a dark shadow swept across the ground and a great wide-winged bird swung in above the

tree-tops and came to rest in the tallest pine, the boy realized that Ringtail had tightened his muscles for the leap.

Chad made his decision instantly. The big gobbler had come. He stood on the high limb upon which he had just alighted, peering all around him with bright, suspicious eyes. This was the moment for a shot—a shot which would surely bring him down. Again Chad's hand tightened on his gun—and again it rested there inactive, motionless.

Once more the woodsman in him had triumphed over the gunner. The gobbler could wait. Above all else Chad was determined to watch to the end the little drama of the woods which Ringtail was about to bring to a climax.

A moment he saw the fox poise himself on the creek-bank, his ears cocked forward now, his body half-raised on his slim, wiry legs, his furry, faintly barred tail twisted a little to the side. Then, like a flash, he bounded over the rim of the bank and vanished.

Chad heard no splash of water as he had expected. Instead came a whirring tumult of wings, as three wood ducks catapulted upward from the creek and sped away through the trees, crying shrilly. Simultaneously Chad leaped to his feet and whipped his gun to his shoulder, the muzzle

pointing upward toward the lofty limb where the gobbler had been perching.

He was too late by a fraction of a second. At the first flurry of the wood ducks' pinions, the gobbler had launched himself from his perch. Chad caught one glimpse of a great wide-winged shape sailing swiftly away amid the tree-tops. Then he lowered his eyes to see Ringtail the fox standing on the creek-bank gazing at him calmly, a male wood duck hanging from his jaws.

For perhaps five seconds the boy and the fox stared at each other without moving. Then, with a sudden swing of his body, Chad leveled his gun. He had watched the woods' drama through to its end; it was now time for action. Ringtail had cost him a fine gobbler. Moreover, wood ducks were favorites of his, and he had learned with angry surprise that among their many enemies was numbered at least one fox.

Chad had never known a fox to prey on wood ducks before; but evidently old Ringtail knew how to catch them, without even getting his feet wet, by stalking them along this narrow woods' creek and pouncing on them when they came out on the sandy margin below the bank. It was time to end the career of this murderer of precious wild fowl and costly thoroughbred hens.

Quickly as these thoughts flashed through the

boy's brain, they were no quicker than the old fox whom they so vitally concerned. Suddenly, mysteriously, Ringtail vanished like a ghost, bounding with the swiftness of light down the steep bank just behind him. Chad ran forward, holding his gun ready; but Ringtail had gone, carrying his duck with him.

For at least three years and probably four, Ringtail had lived in the neighborhood of the plantation. Yet Chad, though he spent much time in the woods, had seen him only three times. In his extreme secretiveness the old dog fox was unlike many others of his kind. Sometimes the gray fox seems to take a certain joy in showing himself to man provided the man carries no gun, but old Ringtail was much too wise to indulge in such dangerous foolishness. He had been hunted too often to take chances; for his unusual size and, especially, his unique brush made him the particular object of many a fox hunter's ambition. Having had but three glimpses of the fox in the course of as many years, Chad would have laughed at the notion that he might encounter Ringtail again that very day. Yet so the forest Fates willed it.

By then it was mid-afternoon. Tired, disappointed and a little angry with himself, Chad was making his way homeward. But for his desire to

watch Ringtail stalk a victim, he would have bagged the big gobbler which his father expected or at least hoped for. He was deeply chagrined at his failure, which he felt was his own fault; and for some hours after the affair in the Otter Woods he had hunted diligently, hoping that he might still have the luck to "walk up" a feeding or roosting turkey. His search, however, had been fruitless. He had seen no game which would serve his purpose, though once at long range he had glimpsed the white flag of a fine buck which leaped from its bed in the green top of a fallen pine tree. Finally, he had given up his quest, and turned homeward.

A deer path brought him to the woods' edge, and for some distance he followed the margin of the forest. To his left stretched a wide expanse of abandoned ricefield, thickly grown with tall cattails, reeds and water-grasses, yellow and sere now that autumn had come. Beyond the ricefields wound a river; and beyond the river lay a wilderness of marsh and low thick jungle, stretching for miles, an almost impenetrable fastness, the home of many deer and even a few black bear.

Chad watched the open spaces to his left rather than the woods to his right. In the woods, little visible life was stirring; but above the ricefields, above the river and above the jungly wilderness beyond, the air was full of movement. Small platoons

of swift-flying mallards winged their way here and there, passing from one ricefield canal to another. Innumerable companies of blackbirds wheeled and maneuvered in the air. Now and again, a flock of doves passed well out of range, their long, pointed wings driving them at high speed. The graceful white herons which abounded on the ricefields in summer had vanished with the advent of cool weather; but in their place had come other birds less beautiful perhaps, but not less interesting—long-tailed marsh harriers quartering the grassy plains; big redtailed hawks, wide-winged and stately; a pair of white-headed eagles soaring grandly in the upper air.

Chad was watching one of the circling redtails when, at a much lower height, three swift-flying birds shot across the field of his vision. He recognized them at once as wood ducks which had come out of the woods to his right; and, following their course, he saw them swing around in a half circle, and then slant down to a spot in the ricefield not far from the woods' edge and perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead. Chad knew that spot well. A pool lay there, just at the head of a small canal—a placid, tiny pond which seemed always to be teeming with life. The wood ducks, he knew, were dabbling about the shallow reed-grown margins of this pond; and he thought with regret of the law which

protected them and of his father's warning to leave them alone. But for that law, he might yet carry home some game worth having—indeed, the finest game that the plantation country afforded.

As he neared the pool, he decided that just for the fun of it, he would stalk the ducks; not in order to shoot them, of course, but simply to see how close he could get to them without being discovered. To carry out this purpose, he turned and made his way across the wet ricefield to a low bank thickly grown with reeds, then walked along the bank in the direction of the pool. Close to the little pond this bank joined at right-angles another and larger bank which extended from the woods clear across the ricefield to the river shore; and just at the junction of these two banks, Chad saw a surprising thing.

He saw Ringtail, the fox, standing in the path on the larger bank; and he saw with interest, too, that Ringtail held the body of a male wood duck in his jaws, evidently the same duck that the fox had captured in the Otter Woods that morning. Plainly Ringtail was not hungry and was saving his game until his appetite returned. But what was he up to now, the boy wondered. Why was he standing motionless on the ricefield bank, his head held high, his sensitive nose testing the air?

Chad, screened by the reeds, stood still as a

statue, his gun ready, his eyes studying the fox. Again an odd stroke of fortune had placed Ringtail at his mercy; yet, again, he found himself loath to fire the shot which would end the career of this furry brigand, this wild hunter whose wits had kept him safe so long amid so many dangers. Chad could not help admiring the beauty of the fox as he stood at attention, keenly alert, vividly alive, his thick coat of silver-gray, russet and black shining in the sun. The young woodsman hesitated. Once more he felt sure that Ringtail was planning something, and again he was conscious of a consuming curiosity to learn what that plan was, to watch the execution of the fox's design.

Presently, as the boy waited, Ringtail dropped the dead duck hanging from his jaws, lifted his head still higher and carefully sniffed the breeze, waving his nose from side to side. In a flash, Chad realized the fox's purpose. Evidently he had scented the wood ducks in the pool a little ahead of him up the wind, and although he already had one duck, he was going to try for another.

For a moment Chad, angry at the thought of a second raid on the ducks, was on the point of throwing his gun to his shoulder. Then suddenly an idea came to him. His tightened muscles relaxed; but more eagerly than ever he watched the fox, awaiting his next move.

That move was exactly what Chad expected. After a moment or two, Ringtail seemed completely satisfied with what his nose told him. Leaving his duck lying on the ground, he walked slowly forward along the bank in the direction of the pool, passing out of sight amid the tall reeds and cattails. Chad waited some minutes, then very slowly and cautiously stole forward almost to the intersection of the two paths. There he halted and stood motionless, straining to catch some sound from the direction of the pool.

He could not see the pool, for the reeds hid it from view. But he could imagine what was taking place there—the three wood ducks dabbling in the shallows close to the margin, idling and feeding amid the succulent green water-growths along the edges; the lithe gray hunter creeping nearer and nearer amid the reeds, skilfully utilizing every scrap of cover to screen his slow approach. Chad knew the spot well. He could see it and its surroundings clearly in his mind's eye; and he figured the chances rapidly, deciding that, on the whole, the odds were against the gray hunter. The dry leaves of the frost-killed cattails would crackle at the slightest touch. It seemed to Chad impossible that Ringtail could make his way through them so noiselessly as to get within leaping distance of his prey.

Yet, strange to say, Chad's feeling had under-

gone a complete reversal. Whereas heretofore his sympathies had been all with the ducks and against their would-be slayer, he now found himself earnestly hoping that Ringtail would succeed. In part, this change of sentiment was due to the admiration which he had conceived for the old fox's sagacity and skill—the admiration which one good woodsman feels for another who has demonstrated his proficiency in the exacting arts of the woods. But in still larger part, the change was due to the idea, the plan, which had been born in Chad's mind a few minutes before. For the success of that plan depended on the outcome of Ringtail's undertaking.

The slow minutes passed. Chad waited as patiently as he could, knowing that the old fox was a careful worker and that this time he had need of especial caution. Yet the boy's patience was almost exhausted when at last he heard the sound for which he had been waiting—a sudden loud splashing, a violent whirring of swiftly-beating wings, followed immediately by the plaintive, discordant cry of a wood duck startled into flight. Chad craned his neck trying to see how many ducks rose from the pool; but the frightened birds flew in the opposite direction, partly hidden by the tall reeds, and he could not make sure whether they were two or three in number.

That, however, mattered little. In a minute or

two, he would know. He waited, tense, expectant, his gun half-raised to his shoulder, his eyes fixed on the open space just ahead of him at the intersection of the two paths. Whether Ringtail had failed or succeeded, he would return to get the duck that he had left on the bank. Chad, standing behind the screen of reeds just around the corner where the two paths came together, would not be able to see Ringtail until the fox had reached the opening where he had left the duck. That would be the critical moment. Chad awaited it, every muscle taut, his finger on the trigger.

It burst upon him unexpectedly, seconds sooner than he expected. He had heard not the faintest sound: but, all at once, there in the opening where the two paths joined stood Ringtail, his tall ears pricked, his plummy, faintly-barred brush waving slowly from side to side. He had not failed. In his jaws he held another wood duck, a fine drake; and with a playful flourish of his head, as though rejoicing over his triumph, he dropped this second trophy of his skill beside the other duck lying in the path.

Next moment, as the old fox raised his head, he saw Chad standing not twenty feet from him in the other path, his gun leveled.

For half a second the two looked into each other's



eyes. Then the crashing roar of the shotgun shattered the silence.

Chad walked forward briskly, breeching the gun and slipping in another cartridge. His tanned face wore a broad grin. He would never forget the expression on Ringtail's countenance the moment before he had pulled trigger, and he wondered gleefully what the old fox was thinking now. One thing he was sure of: Ringtail was still running and he would continue running for quite a while.

Chad stooped and examined the two wood ducks lying on the ground where Ringtail had placed them. They were in perfect condition, unbruised and showing only a few traces of blood. Then he glanced at the cattails beyond the bank, riddled and torn by the charge of turkey shot which he had fired five feet over the fox's head. Finally, grinning more broadly than ever, he picked up the ducks and started homeward.

Presently he laughed aloud.

"So," he chuckled, "the Judge is counting on summer ducks for dinner to-morrow, is he? Well, he'll have them, and without breaking any law either. But he ought to propose a rising vote of thanks to a certain old friend of mine who goes by the name of Ringtail in these parts."

The Way of a Serpent

THE WAY OF A SERPENT

THE sunlight, streaming straight down through wide rifts in the scant foliage of the tall, short-branched sweet gums, smote fiercely upon the stagnant pool, blotching its opaque, wine-colored surface with numberless sharply defined patches of translucent amber. The pool was of oval shape and of small area. A slender gum, uprooted years before by some irresistible equinoctial blast, had fallen clear across it, and, stretching from shore to shore like a causeway or a half-submerged bridge, divided it into two completely dissevered parts. Close around its soft, soggy edge crowded the trees—a few lofty, moss-bearded cypresses, spared by the lumbermen because of some saving defect of shape, straight sweet gums of every age and size, some of them taller than the tallest of the cypresses but dead or dying at their tops. Their column-like trunks soared upward out of a dense thicket of scrubby, close-growing bushes whose small leaves were of so pale a shade of green as to appear almost silver where the light fell obliquely upon them. In front of this solid wall of frondage and springing from the dark, scum-

laden shallows along its base, irregular ranks of slim, plumed reeds formed an unbroken ring around the margin of the pool.

About the pool on three sides the ground was low and spongy and carpeted with a thick growth of short, broad-bladed, moisture-loving plants; but on the fourth side it sloped sharply upward, forming a miniature plateau a foot or more above the level of the water. From this higher ground rose the stalwart gray trunk of a large magnolia whose branches, reaching far out above the pool, cast so sombre a shade that here the water seemed of an inky blackness. The sandy ground immediately beneath the tree was also in dark shadow except a single almost circular patch of sunlight, about two yards in diameter, midway between the base of the trunk and the rim of the pool.

To this spot a ray penetrated through some hidden tunnel in the dome of lustrous foliage above; and upon this white disc of light, his five feet of velvet length disposed in a loose coil and his flat, triangular head pillowed upon the warm sand, lay motionless a male diamond rattlesnake.

The snake, despite his deathlike immobility, was neither dead nor asleep. His small eyes glinted with changing metallic flashes of black and green, like beads of half-transparent obsidian, and seemed fixed in an intent and baleful stare upon the sun-

splashed surface of the pool in front of him. There was something inexpressibly menacing in the cold glitter of those bead-like eyes; and yet, terrible as was his aspect, the snake was undeniably a creature of real and almost marvelous beauty.

A splendid specimen of his race, though not as large as the diamond rattler sometimes becomes, he measured, from the tip of his sharp-nosed, arrow-shaped head to the last of his ten rattles, an inch more than five feet, while the girth of his massive trunk at its thickest part was fully eight inches. The ground-color of his body was a lustrous, almost iridescent grayish-green, and along his broad, arched back a chain of black-brown, diamond-shaped patches stretched from the base of the head, merging finally with the dusky olive of the thick, black-ringed tail. In the coloration of his mailed body there was a richness of tint which could not fail to compel admiration; yet all sense and realization of this beauty of color and pattern were obliterated instantly by a single glance at the wide, flat head and face. These seemed instinct with wickedness and cruelty—hideous, revolting, utterly beyond description.

It was not due to accident that the rattlesnake was lying framed in the queer white disc which formed the only spot of sunlight beneath the big magnolia. He had chosen the spot purposely be-

cause he enjoyed the warmth of the sun and because, being absolutely fearless, he cared not a whit how conspicuous his position might render him or how many pairs of eyes might spy upon him. Presently, when the sun had passed its zenith and the circle of light had shifted a little to the eastward, so that part of his body lay in shadow, the flat head reared itself six inches from the ground, the loose coils slid strangely in opposite directions upon one another, and, when the movement ceased and the head sank again upon the sand, his whole body was once more immersed in light.

For another half-hour he lay utterly still, seeming scarcely to breathe. Then he uncoiled slowly and languidly, swung his slim neck across his stout, olive-colored tail, forming a great loop, and, straightening to his full length, went forth to his hunting.

The snake headed diagonally away from the pool, keeping to the dry ground and avoiding as far as possible the swampy, reed-choked places. He moved a little more slowly perhaps than a man ordinarily walks and his passage was almost noiseless. His body seemed to flow along over the leaves and grass, as though propelled by some mysterious and unseen force. There was a certain dignity about his going—an utter lack of the furtiveness which marks the movements of all the four-footed

forest-dwellers. His spear-shaped head pointed always directly forward, and he passed boldly and indifferently through dense thickets that hid him completely from view and across bare, sunlit places where the brilliant colors of his splendid body flashed and sparkled in the light.

Once, although the snake knew nothing of it and would have cared nothing had he known, a drowsy squirrel, idling away the lazy hot hours on a shady limb of a large oak, saw a wide, gray-green ribbon, braided with black, yellow-bordered, rhomboidal markings, slide smoothly and slowly across an open grassy space far below and vanish in a tangle of smilax beyond—and the squirrel shivered slightly before dozing off again, although his fear must have been wholly instinctive, since never in his short life had he been close enough to that gray-green ribbon to feel the paralyzing power of its glittering eyes. Once, too, a rabbit, stretched comfortably in her soft bed beneath a cassena bush, saw the big snake emerging from a clump of weeds six feet in front of her and, galvanized into instant action, bounded away to the right, making a reckless clatter among the crisp, dead leaves. Except these two, however, none of the keen-eyed woods creatures knew of the rattlesnake's passage across a mile or more of the flat floor of the forest so noiselessly did he glide through shadowed thickets and across sun-bathed,

open spaces alike until he arrived at the border of the hunting ground whither he had all this time been traveling—an extensive clearing on the edge of the woods which years before had been a cornfield, and where countless meadow-mice scurried night and day along their winding, tunnel-like runways through the wilderness of tall broom grass that now covered its furrowed surface.

These foolish and incessantly busy little people of the broom grass were easy and succulent game; and it was for the purpose of hunting them that the rattlesnake had journeyed from the reed-bordered pool a mile back in the woods—an unusual proceeding, since he seldom traveled far at any time and his wanderings, such as they were, generally took place at night.

Along the fringe of the wood, separated from the broom grass field by a dry, shallow ditch and a low bank clothed with a dense tangle of wild-rose vines, ran a shady, grass-carpeted road, apparently seldom used by man since here and there it was almost obliterated by clumps of tall, prickly-stemmed weeds. A fox, coming upon the road, would have tested the wind carefully and looked keenly to right and left before venturing to cross it; but the rattlesnake, of too crude a cunning to recognize the road as different in any important particular from one of the open forest spaces where he was accustomed to show

himself so boldly, paused not an instant. He was half-way across when suddenly and in a fraction of an instant, his big body gathered itself into a close, symmetrical coil, the slim neck bent back like an S, the evil head drawn within the circle of the body, the black-ringed tail, tipped with its ten rattles, pointing straight upward and vibrating so rapidly as to seem a mere indistinct blur.

Thirty yards away down the road a small brindled cur and, some distance behind him, a ragged negro boy of twelve or thirteen years were approaching at headlong speed. The dog was barking excitedly as he ran and looking up into the live-oaks bordering the road at a squirrel leaping nimbly from branch to branch. For some moments the snake could not see them because of an intervening clump of weeds. Possessing no external ears, he heard only faintly, if at all, the sharp yelping of the dog and the shrill shouts of the boy. It was the vibration of the ground which had thrown him upon guard, and had he wished to do so, he might easily have gained the shelter of the vine-clad bank beyond the road.

The snake, however, did not even consider a retreat. He was hungry and consequently in an evil mood, and the tremor of the soil under his sensitive scales inspired him with a terrible fury. He remained coiled in the middle of the road, his eyes

flickering like gems, his whirring rattle rasping its thin, incessant defiance.

The dog did not see the danger and, being young in years and woodcraft, failed to understand the monotonous note of warning. His attention absorbed by the fleeing squirrel, he came bounding along, head in air, careless of the ground in front of him. He leaped clear over the snake; and as he passed, the bent neck straightened like a spring and the javelin-like head, its jaws gaping hugely, lunged upward, seeming to touch the dog gently on the throat where it joined the chest.

The dog did not see what it was that had pricked his skin and at the moment paid no attention to the slight pain. He galloped on, his eager eyes still fixed upon the squirrel, and had passed far down the road beyond the snake before the deadly fluid in his veins began to work. Then he staggered and his excited barking gave place to piercing, agonized yelps. The end came with merciful rapidity. He fell over on his side, lurched once more to his feet, and in a minute or so went down again, his piercing cries reduced to scarcely audible gasps. For a while his limbs twitched and quivered convulsively. Then his gasping ceased and he lay still.

The boy, meanwhile, being more careful of where he placed his bare feet and, moreover, having heard before this the ominous rolling of the kettledrum

that every rattlesnake carries at the tip of his tail, had seen and heard the danger simultaneously and only just in time. He leaped a clear four feet to the right and stood there panting, gazing wild-eyed and suddenly weak upon the doom which he had so narrowly escaped. At first he did not realize that his dog was stricken and he kept his terrified eyes fixed upon the snake until the short, sharp barks changed to shrill, long-drawn cries of pain. He watched the poor beast's death struggles in silence and without moving. Then he turned and fled like a deer.

For many minutes after the delicate nerve mechanism of his under-scales had ceased to detect the slightest tremor of the ground the rattlesnake stood on guard, his whirring rattle sounding its fearless challenge. At length, however, he seemed to realize that the enemy had retreated; and, uncoiling slowly, his beautiful body, straightened now to its full length, began again to glide mysteriously over the ground. In the waste of broom grass beyond the shallow, weed-choked ditch the busy meadow-mice still ran hither and thither along their smooth, well-trodden paths; and, now that his sluggish spirit had been stirred to fury and his body put to violent though brief, exertion, the snake was more than ever keenly conscious of his hunger and more impatient for his dinner.

It happened, however, that Fate had for this day decreed immunity for the timid people of the broom grass. The rattlesnake, having crossed the road, had arrived at the verge of the shallow ditch at a point where a well-beaten path led down the slope between two walls of dense thorny weeds and up the bank beyond into the field. Three feet of his thick body had entered this narrow pass when suddenly he paused. At the bottom of the ditch and full in the path, a slender serpent, whose lustrous black body was ringed with narrow stripes of white, lay stretched at full length, motionless and apparently asleep.

The rattlesnake paused only for an instant. It was surprise, not fear, which had arrested momentarily the slow forward flowing of his massive body; and almost immediately this unaccustomed emotion, impressed but faintly upon his dim intelligence, was lost in the strange senseless fury which possessed him.

He had seen but little of other serpents—except those of his own kind with whom he lived at peace and with whom at certain seasons he was accustomed to associate. His experience with other snakes had taught him only that they, like all the other forest-dwellers, owned his mastery; and, though this slim, white-ringed serpent in the path in front of him was of a sort which he had never

seen before, he never doubted what its conduct would be.

He glided on, therefore, sounding his battle-call, while the metallic eyes scintillated dangerously in his upraised head.

The kingsnake lay absolutely without movement, apparently unaware of the rattler's approach. It chanced that he was at that moment in an unusually peaceable and lazy mood, desiring only to be let alone. He had hunted the broom grass folk to good purpose that morning, and afterwards he had sought the soft sand at the bottom of the ditch to bask in comfort while the two furry bodies inside of him underwent the process of digestion.

Yet, for all his languor, he was not asleep. The mild black eyes set in his small, blunt-nosed head had seen the rattler at the moment when the latter appeared in the path. They had watched the intruder keenly as he glided down the slope and had noted without the slightest change of expression the huge size of that glittering armored body, three times as thick and only a little shorter than his own.

Until the angry, plated head with its gaping jaws was almost upon him, and the slim neck beneath it was bending back for a thrust, he gave no sign either of dismay or of defiance. Then, however, as if only at that moment endued with life and with a lightning-like quickness which rendered the

two movements almost simultaneous, half his slender, whip-like length drew back and flashed forward again, and the battle was joined.

It was a strange fight that raged amid the short weeds and crisp dead leaves at the bottom of the roadside ditch. It had scarcely begun when the ragged black boy, who, a few minutes before had escaped death by so narrow a margin, came at a rapid trot along the road, closely followed by a negro man bearing in his hand a stout hickory stick. These two, hearing a great threshing among the weeds, stood at the entrance of the path leading down into the ditch and watched the duel.

They saw a writhing, twisting yellow and black object whose shape changed and changed again swiftly and incessantly—now straightening convulsively to a length of full six feet, and lashing from side to side, now compacted into a streaked and mottled ball-like mass. It was not easy at first to follow the fortunes of the battle; but presently the man made out that a slender black spiral encircled the forward part of the rattler's thick trunk and that the rattler's head, despite the fetters wound about his neck, struck again and again against some part of this black spiral, the long curved fangs piercing each time the thin mail of the kingsnake's body. The man knew that with every stroke of those hollow fangs, each of them a full inch in length, an-

other gush of venom was injected, though in diminishing volume, into the kingsnake's veins. But he knew also that the kingsnake, by a strange provision of nature, is utterly unaffected by the poison, and from the first he had little doubt as to the issue of the combat.

Yet, for a while, the issue was in doubt; for, although the rattler's poison availed him nothing, the piercing and slashing power of his weapons might well have won the battle before the life was crushed out of him by the increasing constriction of his enemy's slim coils. This was the kingsnake's one weapon—the muscular force of his body. He had strangled many snakes before this—for he fought for the love of fighting as well as for food; but never before had his coils gripped so huge a serpent; and though his wire-like muscles strained and tightened to the utmost limit of their strength, his glittering armor was flecked with crimson in a score of places before the rattlesnake weakened perceptibly.

When at last the contortions of the splendid body, swollen so as almost to hide the slender black cord wound tightly around it, had slackened to a slow, mechanical writhing to and fro, the negro spat upon the ground and cursed delightedly.

“It's all over but de shoutin', Sonny,” he said to the boy. “De kingsnake strangle um an' break he rib. But I don' t'ink he gwine ter eat um, 'cause

de rattler de bigges' er de two. Go t'row de dog een de bushes. Buzzard comin' for um now." And he pointed with his stick at three grim vultures gliding in wide, graceful circles fifty feet or so above the road where the small brindled carcass was lying.

Anhinga Town

ANHINGA TOWN

JUST as the sun's first rays lit the tops of the tallest cypresses of the lagoon a whitetail buck came to the edge of Anhinga Town. There he met face to face another woods wanderer. On a great pine log lying across the buck's path crouched a large male wildcat. Early in the night an otter had eaten a fish on this log, and the big lynx, hungry as always, had been sniffing at the spot where the feast had taken place. The buck's coming interrupted him and, arching his back slightly, he gave a low growl, glaring out of his fierce, glassy eyes at the tall, antlered intruder who stood facing him in the narrow trail.

The buck halted only for a moment. After ranging the woods and broom grass fields all night he was on his way to his bed in a dense myrtle thicket bordering a black gum swamp, and the shortest route to this thicket lay along the margin of the lagoon which was the site of Anhinga Town. Long ago he had outgrown the instinctive fear of the lynx which in his young days would have sent him racing off at full speed at sight of the big cat crouching on the log. He stood for a moment, head

held high, returning steadily the baleful glare of the wildcat's savage eyes: then, shaking his heavy velvet-covered antlers proudly, he strode forward.

The wildcat, apparently without turning his head to see where his leap would take him, jumped six feet backward and faded like a ghost into the cover of the cane thicket clothing the slope of the bank. Leaping lightly over the log, the buck passed on along the narrow path.

Meanwhile Anhinga Town was waking up. In fact, it seemed to be already wide awake, for from many of its houses issued noises of many kinds—noises which might well have given a visitor the impression that the inhabitants were quarreling violently with one another. These houses were situated in tall cypress trees standing in the water of the lagoon. They were all built mainly of sticks, but some were larger and more strongly constructed than the others and were placed much higher in the trees, and it was from these larger houses that the clamor came. These were the homes of great blue herons who had come to live in Anhinga Town and who were now as numerous there as the anhingas or snakebirds themselves.

Very early in the spring, before the snakebirds had returned from the tropical regions where they spent the winter, the herons had set about the business of getting their homes ready for the warm sea-

son, and as a result of this early start every heron home in the town contained young. Hence for the present the town seemed to belong to the herons rather than the anhingas. All day long the place rang with the ceaseless clamor of the heron families, while scarcely a sound of any sort came from the anhinga homes, where always, night and day, long-tailed, long-necked birds, the strangest and most fantastic of all the inhabitants of the swamp country, sat brooding over their bluish-white, chalky eggs which, some day soon, would turn into hungry nestlings as grotesque as the young herons had been when they made their entrance into the world.

In a cypress rising from the water fifty feet or so from the log where the buck had encountered the wildcat, a male anhinga sat in a nest placed in a crotch, formed by the trunk of the tree and the lowest of its straight, short limbs. Above him and all around him hung long festoons of gray Spanish moss swaying slightly in the gentle breeze and forming a sort of curtain round-about the nest, almost hiding it from view. Through gaps in this tapestry the sharp eyes of the brooding snakebird looked out upon the little world of the lagoon.

He had watched with keen interest the meeting of the buck and the wildcat on the bank nearby; and now, sitting motionless and impassive in the nest, his snakelike neck thrust well forward, his

long tail touching the moss curtain behind him, he was wondering what luck attended his mate who was away fishing while, like a good husband, he took his turn at the monotonous business of warming the four blue-white eggs.

It was a monotonous task in one sense only. The anhinga's tree stood close to an opening in the flooded cypress woods, and across and above this opening herons and snakebirds were constantly flying. Most of the young birds in the heron nests were well grown, and these young herons required an enormous quantity of food. They stood on the nests or on branches close by, and when they saw, or thought they saw, a parent heron returning from the fishing grounds they gaped open their bills, flapped their wings, and made an amazing clamor of squawks, croaks and quacks.

There were times when every heron family in the town seemed to join in the din, to which the adult herons often added their deeper, hoarser voices, so that the whole place rang with an extraordinary variety of noises. In these, with scarcely any effort of the imagination, one might distinguish the barking of dogs, the squealing and grunting of pigs, the squawling of cats, the piercing cries of guinea-fowls and even the roaring of wild beasts. The anhinga was entirely accustomed to this clamor and was not in the slightest degree annoyed by it, though he

himself was among the most silent of birds. He sat still and listened and watched.

Above the opening in the flooded woods he saw a great blue heron sweep down the wind, turn, head up into the stiff breeze, and begin to descend. The long wide wings of the great bird curved downward near their tips, his slender neck straightened, his slim legs dangled beneath him as he came down in a gradual slant to his home in the heart of the town, to be greeted instantly by a tumult of squawks and welcoming catcalls.

High in the air, much higher than the heron had been, an anhinga came into view. When he was nearly over Anhinga Town, but a little down the wind from it, he swerved from his straight course and, with wings stiffly extended and long tail spread like a fan, he planed down an invisible spiral stairway from the sky. Very like an airplane he looked, with his long neck and tail and his motionless wings, but lighter, more graceful, more buoyant than any sky-ship ever made by man; and with ease and grace which would have made the best of human air pilots envious, he came to rest upon the top of a dead cypress on the outskirts of the town.

Instantly, then, the gracefulness which had distinguished him in the air left him. Grotesque and fantastic to the last degree, his snaky neck sharply crooked, his dagger-like beak thrusting this way and

that as he peered about him, he seemed half bird, half reptile, a reminder of those outlandish feathered creatures of the dim past when the avian race was in its infancy. Seen in the shadows, there would have been nothing to offset this grotesqueness of form and awkwardness of attitude; but perching there in the brilliant sunlight on the summit of the naked cypress top, he was not the somber-hued creature which he seemed when he stood with wings half-open, like a gorged vulture, on some dead limb in the dim, ghostly, moss-tapestried swamp glooms. A green iridescence played upon his glossy black neck, breast and white-tipped tail; upon his back was traced a delicate lace-like pattern of shining white; short gray plumes adorned his head and neck; a rounded blue spot at the base of his bill shone brightly in the light, and the long, straight bill and small throat pouch were of a rich orange color, matching the hue of his webbed feet.

The brooding anhinga spent no time admiring his kinsman—a replica of himself—on the sunny cypress top nearby. To him a more interesting because a less familiar sight was a magnificent wild turkey gobbler who walked slowly along the bank at the lower end of the lagoon, pausing upon the big pine log where the otter had feasted and the wildcat had met the buck. The anhinga looked to see the harem that should be following this superb bronze

sultan of the woods; but it was nesting time for the turkey hens and they were all sitting on their eggs in secret places in the deep woods or in dense thickets in the broom grass fields.

The gobbler was still standing on the pine log when the anhinga's sharp ears detected, amid the clamor of the herons, a high thin note twice repeated, coming from amid the cypress trunks beyond the opening in the flooded forest. He knew that it was a female wood duck talking to her little ones, and after a moment or two she came swimming slowly down a winding water lane amid the trees, seven downy yellowish ducklings paddling behind her.

Other eyes saw the wood duck and her brood. One of many logs of various sizes, which lay more than half submerged amid lily-pads and duckweed in the sunlit water near the margin of the lagoon, moved ever so slightly, sinking a little deeper until only two knobs showed above the surface. Very slowly these two black knobs moved forward, cleaving the carpet of duckweed, taking a course which would intersect that of the wood duck and her children.

At that moment the big gobbler on the pine log straightened suddenly. Some sound, the meaning of which puzzled him, had come to his ears from the woods encircling the lagoon and he raised his

head high to look and listen. A swamp rosebush hid the gobbler from the wood duck a hundred feet away on the lagoon. Yet the duck saw something move on the bank beyond the bush, though the intervening foliage prevented her from perceiving that it was only a turkey. Since the thing that had moved was on the bank it might be a man, and the mother duck did not believe in taking chances. She turned, spoke a word to her children and headed back along the water lane that led deep into the cypress woods.

The two black knobs moving across the carpet of duckweed came to rest, and presently there rose from the water behind them a black, log-like thing which, viewed at right angles, looked rough and jagged. Though he was not aware of it, the young five-foot alligator was a good deal of a philosopher. If he could not dine on duck just now, at any rate he could resume his interrupted sun-bath and enjoy the warmth of the sunlight on his back.

The brooding anhinga was watching the turkey, still standing erect and alert on the pine log, when another note, this time shrill and insistent, from the mother duck caused him to turn his head. The duck had turned out of the winding water lane and was leading her children away from it through the flooded cypress woods, following a tortuous course in and out amid the tree trunks. In a mo-

ment the anhinga understood the reason for her sudden change of direction.

Down the middle of the water lane the grim monarch of the lagoon was coming. No 'gators of the largest size lived in or visited Anhinga Town because this lagoon was not a large one and its waters were generally shallow. Hence the eight-foot saurian now approaching, his long head and four feet of his jagged back showing, lorded it over all the other denizens of the bird city who lived on or in the water under the homes of the snakebirds and herons.

The king of the lagoon either did not see or took little interest in the wood duck family who had so hastily removed themselves from his path. He came on slowly and with dignity down the water lane to the opening in the flooded woods, turned slightly to the left, forged through the lily pads and duckweed like a half-submerged submarine, and came to rest in a shallow place near the shore where the sunny water was very warm. Sinking a little deeper, he lay motionless, scarcely distinguishable from the three or four logs in the water near him.

He had been lying there, utterly still, for nearly half an hour when a crashing roar like a clap of thunder shook Anhinga Town. For a moment even the din of the young herons was hushed, only to break out again more loudly than ever as the fright-

ened adult birds rose from the nests with a mighty flapping of wide wings to circle about just above the tree-tops, croaking and squawking. Down from the pine log pitched the big bronze gobbler. For four or five steps he raced along the bank: then his great wings opened and with quick, powerful beats he swept out over the lagoon. Making a wide circle over the water, he nearly brushed the nest of the anhinga with a wing-tip as he shot past, heading at full speed for the big swamp a mile away to the south.

The anhinga, crouching close upon his nest, saw a man come running along the bank—a negro, with a single-barreled shotgun in his hand, peering eagerly across the lagoon in the direction which the turkey had taken.

The hunter saw no bronze-feathered carcass lying on the water, and presently he walked on towards the pine log and searched the ground near it. He found no feathers there either and he grinned disgustedly with a gleam of white teeth. For months he had been trying to get this gobbler, the biggest in those woods, hunting him in season and out. He had tried a long shot from far down the bank because experience had taught him the impossibility of stalking the wise old bird unless conditions were very favorable; and now he was cursing himself for not having made an effort to get closer to his quarry

and cursing also the cheap shells bought at the little cross-roads store.

The negro poacher lingered only a short time on the bank beside the lagoon. His shot might have been heard at the plantation house and he had no wish to fall foul of the master of that plantation.

Fully a half-hour passed before Anhinga Town resumed the even tenor of its life. Within a few minutes the redoubled clamor of the herons sank back to normal, but a longer period elapsed before the two alligators, which had vanished instantly as the shot rang out, renewed their interrupted sun-bath and a big brown banded water snake, which had been sunning itself on a little island of cypress knees, reappeared out of the wine-brown depths.

Gradually those elements of the town's population which had been dispersed or driven into temporary seclusion by the hunter's coming returned to their accustomed places. The gobbler, of course, did not come back; but after a while as many great blue herons and snakebirds as ever were passing back and forth above the tree-tops or perching on convenient limbs, while the fish crows and grackles, which were among the town's most abundant inhabitants, had resumed their comings and goings and the small bird-life of the place was active and vocal again.

Presently other visitors came from the woods

around the lagoon. Three gray squirrels and four big, white-eared, white-nosed fox squirrels, whose thick gray-brown fur darkened on the head and tail to black, moved about in the mixed forest of water oak, willow oak and sweet gum beyond the bank where the pine log lay. A small raccoon ambled along the bank and stopped a minute at the pine log to sniff at the spot where the otter had feasted. There was man-scent about the place also, however, and the coon passed quickly on.

He was followed after a little by a cottontail, who came slowly along the bank nearly as far as the pine log and then turned down to the water's edge to nibble the stems of some tall, flag-like aquatic plants which grew there in profusion. Once the little hare stiffened and crouched low in the reeds as a black shadow swept over him; but, glancing up, he saw only a great blue heron flying over the lagoon and above the heron a circling snakebird, and in a moment the cottontail resumed his feeding.

The brooding anhinga saw the rabbit come down to the edge of the water. Whether by accident or as the result of some sequence of ideas in the bird's rudimentary mind, the anhinga's gaze shifted immediately to the big alligator lying nearly submerged amid the logs and lily pads fifty yards away across the lagoon. It may have been mere chance which caused the snakebird to glance at the 'gator

at precisely that moment; but only three days before he had looked down from his nest upon a rather interesting occurrence which took place shortly after a cottontail had hopped along the bank and turned down to the water at that very spot to nibble at those same succulent plant stems.

Possibly, therefore, the anhinga expected to see what he now saw—a gradual subsidence of the 'gator's loglike back until it had sunk out of sight altogether and only the black knobs which were the saurian's eyes and nostrils remained above the surface.

Very slowly these knobs moved in the water. Then they, too, sank until only the hind pair were visible—two dark spots, each of them no bigger than a walnut, on the level carpet of duckweed, the surface of which was marred by many other spots and objects of various shapes—rounded tips of cypress knees, the ends of waterlogged sticks, small logs, and branches fallen from the trees, with here and there the upthrust head of a terrapin or a frog. A man would not have been likely to pick out from among all these the two dark knobs which were the 'gator's periscope; and so slowly did these knobs move across the duckweed carpet that upon a casual glance they would not have seemed to move at all.

The cottontail at the edge of the water nibbled away contentedly. The shadows which swept over

him from time to time no longer startled him. He had discovered that they were all made by harmless herons and snakebirds. Ordinarily, swiftly moving shadows like these scared him badly, but now he paid no further attention to them. Two Florida gallinules walked close by him, apparently without seeing him, talking volubly to each other. Wise in the ways of the water-folk of the lagoon, they may have seen the periscope of the long, armored submarine coming gradually nearer and nearer, and possibly its slow, menacing approach was the subject of their conversation. To the cottontail, however, their language was meaningless and he gave no heed to them or to their gabble.

The anhinga on his nest watched in silence, his gaze shifting back and forth between the cottontail and the two black spots out in the lagoon moving so slowly that the movement was barely discernible. Minutes passed, and presently the anhinga's attention was diverted to the three gray squirrels which, more lively and more agile than their handsomer, darker-gray, white-nosed kinsmen, were playing a game of hide-and-seek in a water oak, some of the branches of which projected far over the quiet waters of the lagoon.

They were happy little people, these squirrels, next to the otters the most playful of all the furred folk of the swamp woods. Here and there amid

the branches of the oak they chased one another with what seemed like reckless abandon, racing along the stout main limbs, flinging themselves in long leaps from bough to bough, swinging precariously on the smaller moss-draped branches which swayed and bent beneath their weight.

Even less than the cottontail were they concerned with those two black spots on the surface of the water almost directly beneath them and now scarcely fifteen feet distant from the place where the rabbit was feeding at the water's edge.

Away to the right, beyond the open space in the flooded woods, the brooding anhinga saw a dark shape come swinging down the water lane that wound amid the cypresses. This traveler of the water lane traveled not in the water but in the air some ten feet above the surface. His wide wings stirred the moss-pennants trailing from the trees, and he came so swiftly that almost in an instant he had reached the end of the lane and had swept out above the open water.

The anhinga crouched close on his nest. The great horned owls who lived in the deep woods near the farther edge of the lagoon had never molested him; yet he did not like them and on the rather frequent occasions when they hunted by daylight he took pains to keep out of their way. The owl was heading almost directly towards him, but he sat in

his moss-curtained house as still as a bird carved out of black marble.

His ordeal was only momentary. In a fraction of a second the owl had passed the anhinga's cypress and, swerving suddenly in the air, had shot upward with increased velocity along a steep incline towards the outermost limb of the wide-spreading oak.

Along this limb, heading towards the outer end, raced one of the gray squirrels. The owl's wide wings darkened over him, long needle-pointed talons were reaching for him when he leaped—wildly, aimlessly—out into the air. The horned killer's momentum carried him fifteen feet beyond the limb; and just as he checked his course and turned, he saw the squirrel hit the water with a splash, disappear for an instant, then strike out awkwardly but bravely for the shore.

The big owl circled over the lagoon, spiraling gradually down towards the surface. There was no hurry now. The squirrel was at his mercy and he would take his time, for he was not especially skillful at plucking his prey from the water. Suddenly, five feet behind the swimming squirrel, a black hideous object burst from below through the thin film of duckweed. As it lunged forward, huge jaws studded with long teeth opened and engulfed the squirrel. For a moment the whole head and two-thirds of the body of the saurian king of the lagoon

appeared above the surface as, with an upward toss of his head, he swallowed his victim whole. Then gradually the long body sank out of sight again until the circling owl saw only the periscope eyes.

A hundred yards from the shore of the lagoon, in a dense thicket of cassena, the cottontail came to a halt. He had seen the owl as the big bird turned in the air after stooping at the squirrel, and he had not stopped running until he had gained his cassena fortress which no owl or hawk could penetrate. The anhinga on his nest had already forgotten the tragedy he had witnessed. High above the opening in the flooded woods a female snakebird, her fawn throat and breast gleaming white in the sun, was planing down to Anhinga Town.

Somehow, even at that distance, he recognized his mate. He stirred on the nest, half-opening his wings. His turn of duty was over for a while. In a few minutes he would be circling upward above the cypresses and heading away to his favorite fishing ground—a large lagoon five miles to the northward—leaving his mate to warm the blue-white eggs in the moss-curtained nest and wile away the hours by watching the varied activities of Anhinga Town's inhabitants.

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